# FIFTEEN RANGE ROMANCES

25¢

FEB.

## THE QUEEN OF HEARTBREAK

by ARTHUR LAWSON

BRUCE CASSIDAY

T. J. ROEMER

MANY OTHERS!

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# ARE THESE MISTAKES HOLDING YOU BACK?

***If you're not getting ahead as fast as you'd like, check these possible reasons. Find out why you're not a success and what you can do about it.***

YES NO

- ☐ ☐ **Do you put things off?** To get anywhere you have to make a start.
- ☐ ☐ **Do you really want to succeed?** Isn't there something you want enough to work for it? Marriage, a new home, money for your family—all depend on your advancement.
- ☐ ☐ **Are you unwilling to give up temporary pleasures?** Some people think more of a good time now than of promotion and higher pay later on.
- ☐ ☐ **Are you too lazy to plan ahead?** You've got to manage your life, plan for success and stick to it.
- ☐ ☐ **Are you afraid of responsibility?** In a bigger job you'll have to make decisions, act, *be* somebody.
- ☐ ☐ **Are you short on courage?** It takes grit and determination to set a course and stick to it.
- ☐ ☐ **Is your education limited?** The good jobs go to men who *know*—men with sound training in their field. I. C. S. offers you that training.
- ☐ ☐ **Do you think you can't afford specialized training?** College may be too expensive, but home study lets you earn while you learn, at 1/10 the cost.
- ☐ ☐ **Do you hesitate to find out where to get training?** If you shy off from taking the first step, you'll never achieve success.

**One out of three** who read this page and check their shortcomings will *do* something about it. Two will stay in the rut. One will plan for self-improvement and stay with it till he gets there. Are you the one?

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# FIFTEEN RANGE ROMANCES

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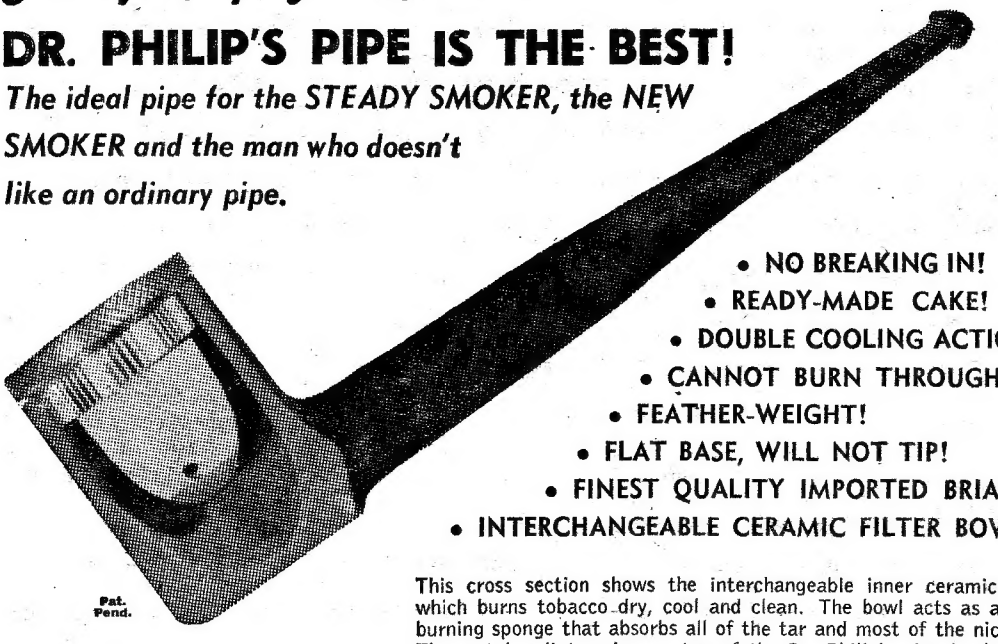


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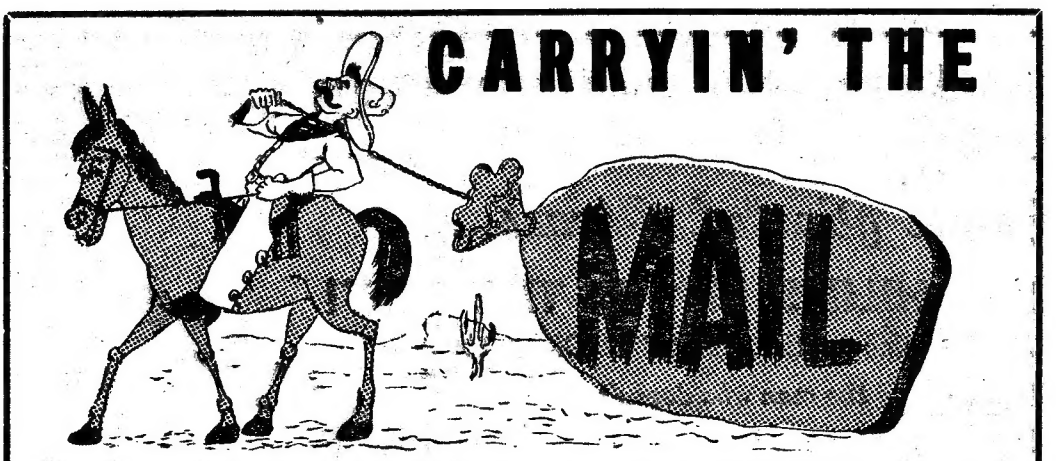


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*Buenos dias, amigos:*

Lots of folks don't know how easy it is to corral a bunch of marvelous new friends. All it takes is pen and paper, and an envelope with a stamp on it—and a little pep. Now, that isn't unreasonable, is it? The satisfactory results are proved by the many letters we get from grateful folks all over the world.

There are two ways to go about getting these pards. One is to write a letter describing yourself and your hobbies. Mail it to Carryin' The Mail, Popular Publications, Inc., 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, N. Y. We'll print it in these columns, and your replies will start coming in to you as soon as the issue hits the stands.

The other way is to select a pard from the printed letters, and write straight to them—any number of pards, if you like to write letters.

And now the mail is in for the February issue, so step right up to the bunkhouse and see who's waiting to hear from *you!*

**Real Westerner**

Dear Editor:

Howdy! Sure like to hear from anyone interested in the West; horseback riding, Western fiction readers, cowgirls and cowboys—anyone who loves the great outdoors. Will answer all letters, you can be assured.

I've worked on a large cattle ranch in the desert for a while, and now that I've moved to the San Fernando Valley again I don't find many people who even know which side of a horse to mount. My hobbies are writing Western fiction, taking pictures, horseback riding, etc.

Shall sincerely appreciate getting my letter printed in *15 Rangeland Romances*. In the latest issue, I notice, you have a story by Ben Frank. His stories are always good. Enjoy the magazine very much. It really comes to life as I read the stories.

BOB McDUFFIE
Rancho Del Humilde
Box 5510, Ethel Ave.
Van Nuys, Calif.

**Roseann, Beatrice, and Delores**

Dear Editor:

We are three girls who live together and would like very much to have our letter published in Carryin' The Mail. We'd like to hear from any fellas and girls between the ages of 18 and 26 who are single and full of fun, and we will answer all letters.

Roseann is 18, 5 feet 5 inches tall, has light brown hair and gray eyes. She is interested in all sports, dancing and music. She is a member of the Church of the Brethren and is active in the youth activities.

Beatrice is 23, 5 feet 5 inches tall, has reddish brown hair and brown eyes. She is interested in music (all kinds), writing letters, and oil painting. She is also a member of the church and active in the youth group and a teacher of a primary class.

Delores is 18, 5 feet 5 inches tall, has dark hair and blue eyes. She is interested in sports,

and hillbilly music. Originally she is from Pa. and also attends the Church of the Brethren.

Together we enjoy hiking, picnics, and riding around in a car. Among friends we are known as the "three musketeers" and we will be glad to exchange snapshots with anyone who requests them.

Please don't forget us!

ROSEANN MOHLER,
BEATRICE FRICK
DELORIS SMITH
152 N. Prospect St.
Kent, Ohio

**Lonely Airmen**

Dear Editor:

Please let a lonely airman get his plea for pen pals in Carryin' The Mail. I am 24 years old, weigh 160 pounds, and 5 feet 8½ inches tall, have blue eyes and brown hair. I hail from the northern part of Arkansas. I'm a clerk typist stationed with the United States Air Force at Lockbourne AFB, Ohio, and have lots of spare time. So how about hearing from some of the boys and girls?

S/Sgt. AMOS A. WATTS, JR.
AF18292921
324th Strat Recon Sq (M)
Lockbourne Air Force Base
Columbus 17, Ohio

**The Texas Kid**

Dear Editor:

Just a few lines to let you know that I am a constant reader of your *15 Range Romances* and I find that the stories in your magazine are most interesting. I am a bachelor and get very lonely. I would like to hear from ladies between 25 and 40. I am 38 years old, 5 feet 4 inches, brown hair and blue eyes, weigh 130. I love all kinds of sport and have a three room cottage and a 1953 Buick Conv.

THE TEXAS KID
(Mr. Shorty Robbins)
No. 605 Sayles Blvd.
Abilene, Tex.

*(Continued on page 9)*

Statement required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Acts of March 3, 1933 and July 2, 1946 (Title 39, United State Code, Section 233), showing the Ownership, Management, and Circulation of Fifteen Range Romances, published bi-monthly at Kokomo, Indiana, for October 1, 1953. 1. The names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. Editor, Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. Managing editor, None. Business manager, None. 2. The owner is: Popular Publications, Inc., 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. Shirley M. Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. 3. The known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: none. 4. Paragraphs 2 and 3 include, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting; also the statements in the two paragraphs show the affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner. Signed, Henry Steeger, Publisher. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 28th day of September, 1953. Eva M. Walker, Notary Public. State of New York. Qualified in New York County, No. 31-8506600. Certificate filed with N. Y. Co. Reg. Commission expires March 30, 1954. (Seal)—Form 3526—Rev. 8-50.

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# Transformation

*When I ride alone,*
*The moon is blue,*
*The purple hills*
*Are lonely, too.*

*Then my cowboy comes,*
*With smile so gay;*
*With his guitar*
*Sings my blues away*

*I find the hills*
*Are all abloom;*
*The breeze is sweet*
*With sage perfume.*

*And the moon is bright*
*With magic gleams,*
*To light our way*
*Down a trail of dreams.*

—*Pauline Booker*

*(Continued from page 7)*

**Peppy Gal**

Dear Editor:

What are the chances of a lonesome Idaho girl getting on the Carryin' The Mail list? I am 15 years old, 5 feet 2 inches and weigh 130 pounds, red hair and blue eyes. My nickname is Sunny. My hobbies are going to the shows, singing, collecting song books and movie stars' pictures and reading Western love stories. My favorite sports are basketball, bowling and ice skating.

My favorite singers are Nat "King" Cole, Frankie Laine, Doris Day, Jimmy Boyd, Rosemary Clooney and the Four Aces. My favorite movie stars are Jess Chandler, Donald O'Conner, John Payne, James Stewart, Gary Cooper, Janet Leigh, Virginia Mayo, Susan Hayward, Vera Ellen, Yvonne DeCarlo, and many more. I will answer letters from everyone from 14 to 20.

JEAN SMITH
215 West Mission
Kellogg, Ida.

**Texas Gal in Alaska**

Dear Editor:

How's about letting a lonesome gal from up Alaska way into your group of pen pals! I'm 5 feet 2, eyes of blue, long black curly hair and 22 years old. My hobbies are: Collecting stamps, drawing and painting and writing poetry and songs. I love all kinds of outdoor sports and I play the guitar. I like Western and hillbilly music. I was born in Texas and hope to return some day. My nicknames are Roxy and Smoky and Boots, but most everyone calls me Roxy.

EVELYN LANDERS
Gen. Del.
Palmer, Alaska

**Wants to Write to Servicemen**

Dear Editor:

This is my first attempt to have a letter appear in your wonderful magazine. Would like to hear from gals and guys and especially from Servicemen all over the world. Would like to hear also from hospitalized Servicemen in the States and Overseas. I have worked around our veterans and know how much they like to get letters.

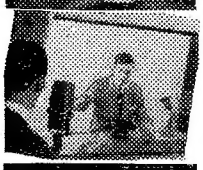
I am 5 feet 5 inches tall, weigh 122, age 22. Have dark hair and dark eyes. Am of Southern ancestry, and have traveled quite a lot.

I like most all sports, especially baseball. Like bowling. Can swim, dance, and love all music, popular or hillbilly. I ride horseback, tap dance, and play the guitar. My hobbies are collecting Army shoulder patches and writing letters.

ETHEL M. ALARI
110 Isabella St.
Sioux City 3, Iowa

*(Continued on page 111)*

# I Will Train You for Good Pay Jobs in RADIO-TELEVISION



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# BUSHWHACKED HEARTS

SHE picked up her pen and wrote, *Dear Paul* . . . and after that she paused.

Her gaze drifted out the window to where morning's streaming golden sun lay gently upon a horizon of solid flowers capped by the towering white crowns of the Rockies.

How would Paul ever understand what happens in this wilderness? she thought. How could he grasp its moods of flowing peace, and then its savage violence? Back

"There's something very elementary I haven't learned yet, teacher."

**Lillian was a good little schoolmarm, but she still had to learn the kissin' score. . . .**

in Boston he stands against nothing taller than the buildings and Beacon Hill. How would he know of hills touching the ceiling of the world, making a human being a pigmy; of stars so low their light washes like a blue-shadowed sea around you?

Her thoughts drifted back two years, to Boston town, to Paul Beldon. A handsome boy of good family, and reliable as a clock. One day each week he worked late on books, one day he went to his club. One day he took her for music and one for dancing, or in summer, for boating. Always it was the same day, and always they were home at a precise, reasonable time.

"I would not have the neighbors gossiping," he told her. "Like Caesar's wife, mine will be above reproach, even by idle tongues."

She had believed that very thoughtful of him, very self controlled. Impulse was something he shunned and disapproved of.

He was rock solid, steady; his wife would never have to fret or worry.

Yet each time he pressed her for a wedding date, something within her resisted. Finally he said, "Much as I disapprove, Lillian, perhaps you are right and it is better for you to go away until you are certain. We will say a year, then . . . it will give me time to do some extra work."

So she had come here to Powder River as a schoolmarm. . . a proper Boston miss who had never really been kissed, and never heard a cuss, and Hell's Half Acre was right across the way. It was something she heard of but disregarded. The ways of outlaws would never touch a proper teacher.

To her consternation she learned that it was difficult to tell the difference between many a good citizen and some of the outlaws. There were known outlaws on hand, at her first Odd Fellows dance, some of them quite well accepted.

The one she picked for the most reckless turned out to be a rancher. He was young, with hair that would scorch your hand, and the laughingest, bluest eyes she'd ever seen. For a full hour he stood by a post watching her solidly and boldly; so boldly that three times she felt of the fine brown cameo at her throat to be sure it had not come unclasped.

At first she was outraged, then flustered; then her eyes were drawn to him as if by a magnet.

He grinned straight at her with a man's appreciation on his oak-tanned face. For that instant, she lost possession of herself and stood fixed, frozen by some strange new emotion.

Catching herself, she snapped away her gaze and lifted up her chin. But in the next turn of the dance, her eyes strayed back. She flushed violently and upbraided herself for even noticing such a bold, ill-mannered man, and then her eyes betrayed her again.

He laughed, and at the break, crossed the room with a long swinging stride and came straight to her. "Ma'am," he said, "I aim to be your oldest pupil. There's some things I should learn yet."

Bold devils were whirling in his eyes and her Boston propriety was incensed. But indignation was futile against such forthrightness. And besides, she was curious about him. And so she arched her jet black black brows and murmured, "Why, I can't imagine anything you wouldn't know, Mr. Red!"

"Bull's-eye!" he acknowledged. "But, matter of fact, there is one thing." His gaze remained on her, and she could feel the vitality beat out of him like heat.

The fiddlers struck up, and before she knew it, he was sweeping her off into a reel; dancing as later she learned he rode a horse. . . . He was reckless, sure and dashing, and at the end of the set he had her breathless, the music singing in her veins.

He took her elbow and led her out with the crowd, down the long flight of stairs from the hall, to the picnic grove a block away.

Old man Meeghan was down there under four Japanese lanterns, selling soda pop and barbecue. Beyond the circle of gaily colored light, the trees cast mysterious, moon-bathed shadows, and beyond the grove, the river's cool beckoned with romance and enchantment.

He walked her through the trees, and they stood on the bank, watching the dark waters riple with lambent silver. In the far distance the soot-black hills cut their pagan outlines against the sea of stars.

She found his arm around her, and it was improper but exciting, and she stood very still, wanting to nestle against him, but not quite knowing how. He drew her closer and she felt the supple strength of his corded arm; an irresistible strength, like a rawhide lariat.

"I'll be at school first day," he told her. "There's an old desk there with my name already carved into it."

"Don't you dare!" she commanded, for he was mad enough to do it.

He said with a chuckle, "Well, how about daring this?" and he turned her full around to him.

His mouth came down upon hers, hungry and avid and demanding. He caught her off guard, and for a moment she responded. . . . sheer primitive instinct, her body clinging against his. The breeze swept down out of the wilderness, bringing the clean, wild, untamed smells of lands that knew no laws. Her senses hazed and her strength went weak within her.

Then the sheer elemental force of his kiss smashed into her consciousness. She tore from him, backing off with her eyes a-shimmer. "Don't you ever dare speak to me again!" she quavered.

He looked wry under the flooding moonlight, but he didn't roil. He made the best of things with growling humor. He said, "I'll see you at school, teacher. You can't help that."

"Don't you dare," she told him, "or I'll call the marshal!"

He gave a rueful grin and knuckled back his hat. "You keep me out, and you'll wish to thunder I was there!" he told her.

"All I'll ever wish about you is that I'd never seen you!" she flared. And she turned and flitted through the trees, and only a man with serious interest would have caught the sound of her low sob that floated back.

He didn't return to the dance, and she heard later that he got howling drunk at a saloon and whipped hell out of two men.

"That's just about what I'd expect!" Lillian Garber sniffed primly.

The Widow Watts looked at her with bright piercing eyes and asked, "Can't you guess what he beat those men over, dear?"

"What would it matter?" the girl said. "He's just savage, coarse, and rough!"

"Red is a mite wild," the widow conceded, "but the reason he beat those men was for mentioning you."

The girl sat with her mouth parted. Emotions scudded through her and she felt like a prim and prissy fool. "How could he?", she asked herself. How could he insult her himself at one moment, and only an hour later take on two men for just mentioning her?

Then she could see what it was. Rankling pride, an excuse to fight. He probably would have fought over any woman. As a person, she hadn't mattered, any more than when he kissed her. She was sure of it, but gee, he would have been nice if he just weren't such a predatory, wild galoot!

SHE boarded with the Widow Watts, and one week to the day after the dance was her first day at school. She got there early, but a mite of a lad named Skeeter was there ahead of her, waiting to make a deal for ten cents a week to tend her horse and buggy. She made it, smiling, and moved into the schoolhouse with a sense of possession and purpose and satisfaction such as she'd never known back in Boston.

There was a big red apple on her desk, and she picked it up with a touch of appreciation, thinking it put there by Skeeter. Then she saw letters scratched upon the skin, and examining them saw they spelled out *Red.*

Indignation welled through her and she hurled the apple at the big-bellied stove. Her aim was not too good. The apple crashed through a window on the east side of the school. "Oh, darn!" she gasped, and a chuckling voice from somewhere said, "Tch, tch! Now what kind of example will that set? You even hit the wrong window."

She spun about with guilt's fury and saw him leaning in a west window, grinning.

"You . . . you . . . oh! You get away from here this second or I'll send for the marshal, Red!" she exclaimed angrily.

"Why," he drawled, "you can't go putting me out of school if I declare I'm ignorant! Everybody in this state is supposed to have elementary learning, and there's something very elementary I haven't learned yet."

She turned crimson, but her fury was wilder than her embarrassment. She picked up the ruler and aproached with grim intent. "Red, if you bother me once more," she gritted. "I'll really have the law on you, so help me! Now you scat!" Her ruler, the sharp edge too, landed where his arms had been.

He stood just out of reach, grinning, and knuckled back his hat. "You're going to be sorrier than you know," he told her. "I'll bet by high noon you'll be wishing you'd made me your pet."

"What I'll wish," she answered savagely "is that I'd split your head!"

"Now, Lilly," he murmured, "that's no way to go being friendly."

She slammed the window down in his face with an exasperated breath. By then the yard was filling with boys and girls coming a-horseback. From a distance she caught glimpses of one boy who looked quite large, full man's size, in fact. A sense of discomfort streaked through her. It was worse when the boy turned out to have a stubble of beard like wire, and she could remember he'd oggled her at the dance. The Widow Watts had said his name was Blacky Friar, and he was an outlaw and general hell raiser.

But this morning he gave his age as fourteen. The titter it caused was going to cost her control of her pupils the first day if she showed anger, and so she said, "Very well, Blacky, we'll put you in the front seat where you can answer the hard questions!"

She was determined to embarrass him.

She didn't succeed, because he had a streak of low, cunning humor, and would twist the answers he didn't know into a joke that had her more boisterous pupils rolling in the aisles. It was a diffiicult morning, and she gave recess early, watching, with a sense of deep relief, the kids race out like wild colts.

Blacky Friar didn't leave, though.

He said with mock respect, "Teacher, there's jist something there on the blackboard I didn't quite get!"

She gave him a cold look, but there was only one way through this. She said, "Very well, Blacky, if you don't understand third grade arithmetic!" and picked up her pointer.

But the pointer didn't do much good. It gave him a pretext to get near her while he studied the simple addition. Suddenly his arm had lashed around her. She beat furiously at his back with the pointer, but that just brought a grin to his ugly mouth.

"Got temper, ain'tcha?" He chuckled. "I like a woman with some mettle in her!"

He pulled her harder against him, almost squeezing the breath from her, so that she felt giddy and weak. She recalled even in panic what Red had said, and she thought wildly, "Oh, dear God, why did I send him away? At least he's no beast like this one!"

Then Blacky half turned her in driving his brute kiss down into the hollow of her neck. Dazedly she saw the back of the room, and there was Red. Sitting there like a lord watching a show put on especially for him. His chair was tilted against the back wall, and his thumbs were resting on his buckles. There was a mild amusement showing on his face.

FOR THAT moment she utterly forgot Blacky in the fury that blazed up in her for Red. But she had to remember Blacky again, for he'd caught her wrists behind her with one hand, and his mouth was crushing onto her lips.

"Oh, God!" she sobbed. "Oh, Red!"

Red came into action without even moving from his seat. He dropped the chair legs forward onto the floor with a hard bang.

Blacky swung the girl violently from him, and grabbed for his gun, and something flashed out of Red's hand. An eight-inch knife whanged into the wall under the blackboard, pinning the cuff of Blacky's

shirt. The next instant, Red was moving down the room like a puma. His gun was drawn and wicked devils were dancing in his eyes and his lips were pulled in a wicked smile against his teeth.

He snapped out Blacky's gun and tossed both guns on the floor. He jerked the knife free and grabbed Blacky's arm and wheeled him and heaved him through a window. He followed through himself, diving recklessly, without heed of how he landed.

There was sudden quiet, followed by a babble of cries out in the yard; the solid, sickening thud of fist on flesh; the grunts of men with strength that crushes.

She rushed to the window and breathlessly watched Red smash Blacky back across the yard. He stood bouncing him off a shed wall until Blacky's face was one mass of running blood and his knees sagged and he went down into the dust.

The girl was white and trembling, but to her amazement, Red wasn't through. He stood there kicking Blacky. He hauled him upright by the hair and smashed him down. He kept beating him without mercy until Blacky was pleading hoarsely . . . until Blacky actually crawled through the blood-soaked dust clean over to his pony.

It was a sight of such unnecessary and unforgivable brutality that it turned the girl sick. She leaned against the wall, faint and white and tense even after she heard Red's steps tap through the door.

He was mashed up, but he had sloshed the blood off him and stopped the worst of his cuts. He came in looking jaunty, pleased with himself, and grinning. "I told you," he said, "you'd want me for prize pupil! Now, if you'd like, you can explain to me what you were trying to tell him."

"Go away!" she murmured sickly. "Just go away and let me be!"

The grin faded from his face. He studied her with puzzlement. "What's wrong, Lilly?" he asked soberly.

Her shoulders jerked in a convulsive shiver. "That last!" she breathed. "You didn't need to do that to him! It makes you no better than he is. It was vicious, wicked mayhem!"

He blew against his lips and considered her scalding criticism. After a space he said earnestly. "Lilly, you don't know much about this country and tough riffraff like that. What I should have done is shot him dead. Half a beating, and that kind of a snake lies in wait for vengeance."

She shook her head with disbelief. "What did he do that you didn't do the other night?" she demanded.

Red stepped back as if she'd slapped him. His face went ashy beneath its weathered tan. "You'd bracket me with *him*?" he asked, with real shock. Sudden anger surged up through him. "Why, you're just a prissy little dude damnfool, Lilly!" he rasped.

He glared at her, then pivoted on one high cowboy heel and left. A moment later he was riding out of the yard full tilt, his quirt slashing his pony's flanks.

Sickness at the brutality she'd seen still filled Lillian, but tendrils of doubt of what she'd said threaded through her feelings. Red was cruel, he was brutal, he took pride and glory in his savagery. But she shouldn't have compared him . . . or his kiss . . . with Blacky's. After all, there had been excuse for Red.

She crossed the room and picked up the guns and the knife, looking at them with a horrified fascination as she carried them to her desk. She'd seen guns and knives ever since she came West, but now, of a sudden, they took on meaning. They weren't just for decoration, or raising a little whooping ruckus. They were instruments of murder.

She pulled her drawer open and put them in, and stood staring down at them. In that moment, the violence of the country became a real and living thing to her . . . a sinister, wicked enemy. It was a thing

to fight and stamp out, so that when these children grew up, they could live in honor, peace and safety.

She smoothed the signs of commotion from her face with cold water, and rang the children in. They were full of buzz and curiosity, but no more nonsense, such as they'd enjoyed while Blacky was rawhiding her. She could feel their respect, and it surprised her. After that scene, she had expected ridicule and tumult.

She puzzled on that as her horse trotted her home after school. People looked out at her and grinned as she drove through town, and she knew that some of the boys had beaten her in with the story, and that it had been spread.

"How scandalous!" she was thinking. "The school board will never keep me, after this!"

But the school board didn't say a word, and oddly enough, the members acted more friendly than before. Gradually, it dawned upon her that they fully approved of what Red had done, and approved of the fact that she'd found his protection. But, then, they hadn't seen that last ugly episode of sheer brutality. Nor seen him grinning while that monster was forcing his attentions!

She took the guns and the knife to the Widow Watts because she didn't know what else to do. The widow considered, her bird-bright gaze on Lillian. "Red must have been pretty stirred up, to forget his gun," she commented.

The girl looked very cool and stiff. "I wouldn't know why he left it there," she said. "Maybe he was still heated up with his wicked savagery!"

"I could have Red stop by some evening to pick it up," the widow said.

The girl looked out the window sharply. "I don't think he'd care to!" she answered. "And I am sure I would be indisposed if he came."

The widow shot her a knowing look.

She wasn't surprised when she heard muffled sobs from Lillian's room a little later, and peeking in, saw the girl lying full-length on the bed, with her face buried in the pillow.

## CHAPTER 2 ♥ ♥ ♥

RED DIDN'T stop by, but it was pretty small country, and it was impossible not to see him at the dances. He wouldn't embarrass her by not asking her for a dance, and she wouldn't court gossip by refusing. So they established an unspoken armed truce that drifted into a cautious friendship.

But suddenly he seemed to have decided to let bygones be bygones, and he invited her for a picnic ride.

After a moment's hesitation she decided maybe she had been a little overcritical, and she accepted.

They rode out Saturday, up through fall's wild and brilliant colors, with the great bird flocks gathering all through the Big Horns, and the clean, cured smell of the season all around them. They laughed and joked and had their meal upon an overhanging ledge, and the dropping sun showed blood red and painted the vivid picture that reached to the horizon.

She could feel the pull of the man, his wild and reckless power. Even while she was talking about riding back, she was yearning for him to take and crush her in his arms and run his fine, strong hands through her thick jet hair. There was a little telltale sharpness in her voice, and maybe it was in the nervousness of her hands.

He looked at her with a quizzical smile and used the excuse of sundown to tarry. Then sundown broke like organ notes across the sky. The violent colors played on her taut emotions like stirring sound, so that when he took her hand and pulled her to him, all caution fled and she came to

him quivering in every muscle and murmuring thankfully, *"Oh, Red!"*

His kisses covered her lips, her cheeks, her closed eyes. She lay relaxed in his arms, now lost and floating on the sea of her emotions, with golden chimes ringing in her heart, and feeling as if she were dreaming.

The dream broke suddenly, for he'd misunderstood. The tenderness had gone from his mouth and his kisses were hard and cruel, and his eyes were heavy.

She thrust her hands against the hard muscles of his chest, her eyes wide and frightened and indignant as she cried stridently, "Red, not that!"

He let go of her suddenly. "What do you want of a man?" he demanded.

"I want respect!" she told him sharply.

He made a gesture of his empty hands. "You've got it!" he answered ruefully. "But you ain't human."

She glared at him stormily. "Do you think you are? You're no better than an animal!" she flashed.

His face grew cold. It grew rock hard. "So we're back to that?" he said. He pulled to his feet and set his hat. "All right, Miss Glacier," he rasped. "I reckon you want just one thing of a man, but I want everything of a girl, and I wouldn't touch her if I don't get it. You're safe enough. I'll ride you home."

She felt regretful, then, for her flaring words. But it was too late to take them back, and in any case, she'd meant them... almost. But that left room for doubt and guilt, and her proper pride wouldn't accept that. No, she'd been absolutely dead right in what she'd said. Actually, what he'd said was true in reverse. There was a lot of good clean fun in Red, but when it came to love-making, he showed a pure brute nature.

For a few weeks he didn't show, but then the same mesh of social activity as before, trapped then in the same net. They had their dances, at first in hostile silence, and then broken by brittle, barbed conversation. And then, because they liked each other otherwise and sometimes forgot themselves and laughed, they drifted back into friendship, but this time it was restricted and hemmed and walled by guards.

She'd give him no more chance, ever, to mangle the gentleness of romance with the hot raw passions of brutality. And he'd take no more chance of affront and disgruntlement, and being likened to rough rabble and brute animals.

Their hostility dimmed and he began to see her and squire her out again, but there was always the wall between them, on her part of what she'd seen, and on his part, what she'd said. Still and all, he showed her the country. He took her to distant fairs and rodeos she otherwise wouldn't have seen, and he gentled a riding pony for her and took her up into little known mountain fastnesses to watch the sunsets. He showed her a world to the east, cloaked with velvet dusk while the pagan, pastel sundown still lay upon the walls of the highlands. He took her to a high lake one night, so smooth and still that the sea of stars washed their feet, and they watched the reflected passage of a loon more clearly than they could see it when they raised their eyes.

They'd talk . . . there was nothing quiet about him . . . and he'd tell her the legends of the range and about the ways of wild horses, and he told her about the way they'd go back and search out the little orphan colts after a mustang hunt. She'd listen with emotion, sensing the gentleness that lay under his reckless wildness. But she couldn't forget the brutality he'd shown, and when she got home, she'd throw herself down on her bed and sob.

If only, she thought, he didn't have that fierce and cruel and wicked streak! But how could a man with that stay good? How could he be good for a family and community?

And so they never kissed again; they

never as much as held hands. Their lone journeys were the more poignant for it, with their feelings building and throbbing, but held separate on each side of the invisible wall.

She heard of other brutality, but it was a story, impersonal, a distant thing among strangers she scarcely knew. When she heard stories about Red, they became intimate and personal and she'd listen with passionate outrage.

And so she came to Christmas at Powder River, being courted, almost steadily, by a man whose harshness and violence and wildness she held in contempt and horror. And the man, for his part, held her feelings as downright dude stupid, and he still simmered at insult he'd not forget.

THE RANGE, of course, did not guess their peculiar status, except, possibly, the Widow Watts. And the whole community egged Red on to take Lillian under the mistletoe when she opened her present from him . . . a beautifully and delicately carved sidesaddle that he had made himself. Men guessed that is must have taken him most of the fall to fashion.

So the two were driven into a public kiss that they would not have taken had they been alone. Red swung her under the mistletoe, grinning for the benefit of the crowd, but there was no grin in his eyes as he looked at her, and his eyes weren't blue at that moment. They were almost black, and somehow, stark. He brushed her lips with his and found them stiff, and he would have let the matter rest, but the widow came over and near knocked the wind out of them both, whacking them back together.

"Come on, you two!" she sang out. "This is Christmas! What do you think you're getting away with?"

And so they kissed again, and this time, their loneliness and want of each other's arms almost broke the wall of their denial. Her mouth softened and her arms came around his neck. For a long moment, she clung to him passionately, while the crowd grinned and shouted out good-humored comments.

They drew apart, flushed and breathing hard. They darted self-conscious looks at each other, filled part with shame and part with hope. They were back together. That was the important thing, and their eyes said so.

The widow served her famous Christmas breakfast, and then the crowd trooped out to drive across to Slade's. Under some pretext, Red stalled around until the others had left, then brought out the sleigh.

A steady snow was falling, so soft that it seemed to have a gentle sound. But there was no sound in all that white and mystic land except the soft trot of their ponies and the runners in the snow. They were in a world apart, alone, and she took his arm and snuggled against him and leaned her fur-cowled head upon his shoulder.

Dreamily, she murmured, "It all started with Blacky, really. I don't know why the thing seemed so important. It was foolish to let it stand between us all these lonesome weeks."

He reached up and squeezed her hand. He said, "I guess I knew you'd see the light. I guess it's why I stuck around." Then he frowned. "But Blacky's still around, and brooding. It's too bad I didn't shoot him."

She looked to see if he was fooling. He wasn't. She straightened in the seat and peered at him through the whirling snow. *"Red!"* she murmured. "You can't mean that!"

"Would have saved trouble all around," he said. "I, or somebody, will still have to do it."

"Why, Red?" she asked. "Why not leave him to the sheriff?"

He gave a mirthless laugh, and said, "You don't leave this kind of thing to the law, Lilly. This is personal."

"But he hasn't been bothering me!" she declared. "How can you still be simmering on it after all this time? And after the beating you gave him?"

He said flintily, "It wasn't beating enough, Lilly. He's got his nerve back."

Suddenly worry broke her rising anger. "Has he tried to ambush you?"

"No," he said. "But he showed his face in town."

She stared at him with consternation. "Is that all, Red?"

"That's enough!" he said harshly.

She turned from him, and sat very straight, with her hands in her lap, and looked dead ahead.

They'd come a roundabout way and the trail was buried and the ponies had taken them off it. Now he was tooling them back and didn't notice her sharp change.

"Well, it's nothing to worry on," he told her. "But I'm glad you understand, finally."

"Yes, I understand," she answered tightly. "I was a fool ever to forget it! What you want above all things is the chance to vent your brute cruelty . . . to prove that you're a tough man, and strut in pride and glory!"

He turned to her with surprised alarm. "*Lilly!*" he breathed. "I thought. . . ."

"Let's not talk any more about it, Red!" she cut in crossly. "Except for being obsessed with breeding horses, I think you'd be an outlaw yourself."

He opened his mouth to speak, then clamped it shut. His eyes were hard, and his mouth was thin as wire.

He stopped calling, again, and nobody even saw him often in town. He made the excuse that he had to keep an eye on his cavvies with blizzard weather due. On the other hand, Blacky came oftener and oftener to town, boasting, brawling, making trouble. And twice she saw him drifting by the school, and her heart stood still.

Then spring came like a burst of trumpet notes. One week the country was covered with snow, the next week it was blanketed with flowers, and birds were everywhere and the creeks ran pure crystal and sang and chuckled. Young couples were everywhere upon the horizon, riding or driving out to watch the sundowns. The moon rose pure gold off the prairies, spreading its haunting light behind the soot-black line of hills.

It was a time of melancholy and bitterness and poignant loneliness for her, and she was glad for the plans for the spring camp trip on which she'd take her class. She threw herself into the preparations and gathering of donations.

SHE MADE it a big thing. She made it important, so that it would stamp an impression on her pupils and they'd take pride in the studies that they'd make along the way. She got prizes offered, and the newspaper ran a map of the trail she meant to take. Ranchers came forward with the offer of pack ponies, and even hoodlums, or trail help, if she wanted. But the trail help she didn't need, and didn't want in any case. This was something she wanted her pupils to do by themselves so that they'd learn and take pride in responsibility.

She meant to finish up her year with prize classes, and then, she supposed she'd wind up this futile quest for certainty and return to stodgy Boston and marry stolid Paul.

A sob caught in her throat, and she had to still it. And then she got herself in hand and put Red from her mind. The day came for the start of the trip and the town sent them off with presents galore and a lot of fanfare.

The children's families had ridden in to see the party off, and she ran her eyes over their grinning faces, looking to see if Red had come. To see if Red gave a damn about something so important to her if it didn't concern himself.

There was no sign of him, and a melancholy chill went through her. By midmorn-

ing, though, the beauty of the ride had grasped her mood. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes sparking as the party mounted up into the incredible peace and vistas of the Big Horns.

High up, there was a park that Red had shown her; a place where the horse hunters came upon occasion. There was a big log cabin there, set right on the edge of a startling, purple decked ravine that would serve for headquarters.

They cleaned the cabin out and hustled at making camp, and then rode on up into the high rocks beyond timberline. They had supper, then, with dusk rising around them like a velvet tide, the stars awash in the sky right overhead. The kids played their combs and harmonicas and guitars, and Skeeter was a classic drummer with his bones. They sang the wild and reckless and sentimental songs of the cow country, and there was a plaintive, haunting quality in their immature voices that struck straight into the girl's loneliness.

She thought of the time Red had first brought her here, and she forgot to sing and her eyes grew shiny. Skeets brought her a second cup of coffee, and she started as she saw it extended toward her. She put Red, and Paul too, and herself from her mind. She took a guitar and put spirit back into the flagging party.

They rode back to camp late, but they were up at dawn. Skeeter went down to the creek to wash and came back with his brows furrowed.

"Why, what is it, Skeeter?" she asked, laughing at him. "Did you cut grizzly tracks?"

"No," he mumbled, and thought a moment. "But I thought I smelled small smoke, and that was before we'd made our fire."

"Do you think it's Injuns on the warpath?" she joked with him.

He scalded at her humor, and she was instantly sorry for it. Soberly she said, "As a matter of fact, there are probably other campers up here fishing, and you may have smelled smoke."

He looked at her with big grave eyes. He said. "Miss Lillian, for fish, you follow straight up the Powder and turn off into its creeks."

For a moment, his gravity caught her, and she felt uneasy. But then she thought, How stupid to worry! Who'd want to bother a bunch of kids?

She called the children in and assigned to the various groups their different studies. She herself would stay at camp where all could reach her in case of trouble. At the last minute Skeeter developed a stomachache and didn't want to go. He turned crimson at the rawhiding of the other boys, but his jaw was set and he stuck to his story. She knew that he was staying behind because he was worried about that smell of smoke, but she wouldn't embarrass him in front of the other children, so she pretended to believe his excuse.

She strolled out through the high, invigorating air to gather ferns and flowers, and watched with amusement the busy antics of the small wildlife that abounded in the park.

Morning's warmth touched her as the sunlight broke directly on her. It was a very simple, elemental thing, something she would never have noticed back in Boston, but out here it had importance and it was good.

## CHAPTER 3 ♥ ♥ ♥

SHE GOT back to camp light of mood and humming to herself. She set a rich stew simmering and made up sourdough. Skeeter came in for dinner a little after high noon. He brought in nine different kinds of birds' eggs, and was all excited telling her what they were.

After the meal, he went chasing back out, and she stirred around leisurely in

the warm golden sun for a space. She thought how easy it was, out here, to forget civilization, and how easy and sweet it would be to just sit back in lazy peace and let the troubled, hectic world go by.

Paul would never approve of that, she thought. He'd never even understand it. Stripped of his city, his business, his tight little world of clocks and duties and money, he'd be lost. In his small way, in Boston, he was important. Out here, he'd be less than the most stubble-bearded hoodlum who gathered wood and such for the smallest one-horse outfit.

It was an odd thought that clutched at her mind, that Paul was made by his surroundings rather than making them yield to his command. Take Red, now, and put him back in Boston. She couldn't imagine . . . she shivered to think . . . what he might wind up doing. But one thing was sure—he would stand against the prim Boston landscape just as solidly and assertively as he stood against these lawless Rockies.

She felt a twinge of disloyalty to Paul, and put Red and comparison out of her mind. She had the stew starting on the stove inside and she was stirring it when the light shadowed perceptibly. She wondered if a storm was rising, and turned to the doorway.

Blacky Friar leaned in the frame, his eyes heavy and hungry and raw as they burned over her. Another man, equally brutish, lounged beside him, leering.

Blacky made a mock gesture of touching his hat, and spur-dragged in. "Now ain't this a coincidence, Miss Lilly," he drawled, "meeting up like this, way up here atop the Big Horns? And nobody a-tall around to interrupt a little pleasant company."

She had the big spoon in her hand, and she grasped it firmly and commanded, "Blacky Friar, get out of here and take your friend!"

But fear was in her eyes, and he caught the tightness in her voice. He laughed and felt of his dirty stubbled beard. "Why, Miss Lilly, that's no way to greet a he-man admirer," he mocked her. He put a boot up on a bench and leaned his elbow on his knee. He grinned evilly, and jerked his head at his friend. "This here is Hairy Steve, my partner," he explained. "He's kind of partial to you, hisself."

She gritted her teeth hard to stop her quivering. This was play acting now, but it would be no joke soon. These men had trailed the party just waiting for this chance.

"I suppose you're hungry," she managed to get out. "I've got food ready outside. I'll feed you, and then you two get about your business."

"Why, that first part is more sociable, leastwise," Blacky declared. "We'll take that offer, and mebbe by that time you'll change your mind, Miss Lilly."

He jerked his head toward his partner. "Hairy Steve, here, is quite some boy at changing women's minds. Seems to have a way of persuading them to weep and crawl for him, don'tcha Steve?"

"Kinda." Steve grinned, and snapped open a six-inch lock knife to pair his nails. He paused to look down at the knife.

"Yeah, kinda." He chuckled, and then looked at the girl, his flamed-flecked eyes traveling slowly over her, and noting the fright beating against the mask of her expression.

Blacky turned out first. The girl followed, clutching the spoon. Hairy Steve's free hand went to his throat and caressed it as if it were a woman's, as she passed.

They moved to the outside fire, and she busied herself at warming over food and breakfast java. Desperately, she hoped Skeeter would see this from somewhere and race for the older boys. But even if he did, help would be futile, and she knew it. They'd not get there in time.

She put steaming food into tin plates and poured them java.

Blacky noted her shakiness, and chuckled. "Two handsome men like us get you that bothered and flustered, Lilly?"

Panic gave her courage, and suddenly she yelled, "Wait till Red hears this!" because it was the thing that came to mind. At the same instant, she threw the cup of steaming coffee in his face, and darted for the woods.

She heard his bellow of rage and pain, and then she heard thundering noises as she was tripped and landed flat. Rough hands jerked her erect, and a callused palm slapped her head reeling. Hairy Steve had caught her hands behind her, and Blacky stood in front wiping his face with his sleeve, his breath whistling through his nostrils and his eyes burning with anger.

A high-pitched voice rent the tension. "Stick 'em up! I gotcha beaded."

Skeeter came from the edge of the woods, pinched and white of face, his little .22 rifle clutched in hand. The girl called sharply, "Skeeter, go back! Go find the other children! Keep out of this!"

But Skeeter just kept coming, his small jaws set, his eyes gleaming. Then youth's inexperience betrayed him. He came too close, and Blacky lurched and grabbed his gun as it went off, flinging it free. He grabbed the boy up, hauled him to the ravine, and hurled him over the rim. Not even one cry came out of Skeeter. He might be dead, but he had died like a man.

THE GIRL stood, conscious no longer of her own danger. She was filled with pure hatred for these monsters who walked like men. Blacky came back chuckling at the expression on her face. He took pride in making a woman hate him. That was what he wanted.

"Puts a little fight in 'em!" he declared to Steve.

She was wearing a riding blouse with double row of buttons. He pulled out his boot knife and honed it on his palm. He began to snip the buttons off one by one, taking time between. A gloating look was on his face, a wicked, vicious chuckle in his throat. She could feel Hairy Steve's breathing coming hotter and harder on her neck, and feel the way the muscles of his hands moved like snakes at each snip of the buttons.

"Oh, God!" she cried silently inside. "Why didn't I have Red kill this beast?"

But even in that moment, her wish sprang from what he'd done to Skeeter, and not for her own bodily safety.

Then a shot sounded from the woods, and the men moved away and grabbed for their guns. A second shot barked, and she heard a long, rising gurgle come from behind her. Hairy Steve shot once at the woods, and once at the ground as he sank. Then his knees buckled, and he pitched into the campfire.

Blacky dropped his knife and clawed his gun out, and as Red showed at the edge of the clearing, he began to fan. Red came forward at a zigzag run, all hell's fury on his reckless face, not giving a damn for the bullets that spit by him. He threw himself aside and froze suddenly, and put an aimed shot at Blacky, tearing his left shoulder. Blacky cursed and sent his sixth shot slamming back at him.

Red grated a wild, wicked yell, and came charging. Blacky turned gray. He didn't have time to reload, and he'd never make the cabin. He spun to the girl, reached for her and caught her wrist. But she fought him with savagery she had never before known.

He released her suddenly and hurled his gun at Red, and scooped up the knife he'd dropped. Wild lights streaked out of Red's eyes and he lifted a savage, spine-chilling yell. He threw his gun aside, reached to his own boot, and came the last ten feet with his own knife in hand.

The two men circled a moment, balanced, but they were stiff of joint, grotesque of posture. They locked with a howl, and

blood began to spurt. There was the sickening slither of long, keen knives chopping into human flesh. They fell and rolled and fought with knee and knife and gouging fingers, fighting clean across to the ravine.

Blacky tried to ram Red over, and Red used the motion to roll of his own accord and jerk Blacky after. They went over the rim roaring sounds like those of wild beasts. She could hear them crashing and thrashing through the brush of the precipitous slope even as she picked up Hairy Steve's gun and ran to help.

She stood on the rim watching them fight. The two men crashed on a narrow ledge. Blacky looked dazed and befuddled as Red snapped to his feet and gave him a kick that brought a tortured groan from him. Blacky was finished. There was no more fight in him but Red stooped and picked him up by thigh and armpit, and lifting him overhead like a sack of oats, hurled him out into the abyss.

Red watched Blacky go down, and Blacky's panicked howl floated back. Then Red wiped his hands free of blood and leaned against a rock, breathing hard.

Above him, the girl looked at the gun she held, and thought she'd have been just as violent as Red, if she could have been. She turned sick inside and dropped the gun as if it were a snake.

Right after that, Red lifted his face and saw her.

"Red!" she called. "Skeeter's down there in the brush!"

Red moved across the ledge and turned the boy over. Skeeter was knocked out, but alive. She let down a rope and he made it fast under the boy's armpits, and then he instructed Lillian how to haul. He scrambled alongside, holding the boy's head clear of rocks.

They came over the rim, and her first glance flashed at Red, and she gave a tight, stricken sound at the way he was stabbed and the flow of blood.

He said, "It's all right. Take care of him," and he lurched off for water.

She picked up the mite and carried him into the cabin. Skeeter was conscious again and sobbing.

The fall had pretty well roughed him up, and as far as Lillian could figure, two ribs and his leg were broken.

Red came in, washed down, with most of his blood stopped. He was stripped to the waist, and she gasped at his cuts and stabs, but he'd found ferns and cobwebs and patched himself up woods fashion.

He made Skeeter a splint and bound his chest with bandages which Lillian cut. He winked down at the boy, and told him, "That was some fight we had, pardner. Except for you, he'd of had me."

Skeeter stopped sobbing and his eyes grew big. All through his youth he'd take pride in the story that Red had built, and in the future it would mould his manhood.

Lillian got out tinned milk and gave it to Skeeter laced with whiskey. Then she drew him broth off the simmering stew, for strength, and after a time his hurts grew less and he dozed.

Then she and Red moved outside into the softening evening light. She said with embarrassment, "I have much to thank you for. You followed just in case of this."

"Mebbe a hunch," he said gruffly, but he was still hot with savagery and his pride was up.

She murmured, "It was a very brave thing you did, Red, taking on two like that, and throwing away your gun to fight him man to man with knives."

He gave a snort of bitter laughter. "My kind of fighting!" he told her harshly. *"Brute means for a brute!"*

Then the pound of ponies running full tilt drummed down the trail, and the bigger boys came bursting out of the trees. They'd heard the shooting and read it for trouble, and had come racing back to lend a hand. Soon after, the younger children followed.

No more intimacy was possible. Red thought they had best move Skeeter downtrail that night before his bones began to mend. They had supper, with the kids full of wild commotion, while Lillian and Red kept a heavy silence.

RED FIXED a hammock sling on a pack pony and led out, while Lillian rode beside Skeeter. It was a quicker ride down grade, and they were back in town by midnight.

Red carried Skeeter into old Doc Mullford, and after a brief examination of the boy, Doc looked at Red and allowed, "I figure we'll just do a little patchwork on you first, mister. Skeeter's all right for now."

So the girl left the two and went out to herd her charges home. When she came back along the street, Red was in the saloon telling the story to a crowd who'd gotten out of bed just for it.

Her breath caught, and hurt filled her, and then she pressed the hurt out with harshness. He'd known she wasn't going straight home to bed. He might have left a message for her.

Still, maybe he'd come by yet. She went home, and the widow brought her supper and coffee out to the cool of the front stoop.

Finally, dawn streaked the sky with gray, and then with rose and jonquil. Like a signal, it set her mind. He was brave, he was good in many things, she owed him something more than her life. Under the circumstances, she could understand and forgive, and even condone what he'd done. She could see now what she hadn't seen before . . . in a land of violence, violence was the only measure of a man.

A few hours before, at camp, she would have told him so, and sunk into his arms without any reservation.

But now she knew what had really bothered her. He loved her in his way, she supposed, but everything still went back to that first night when he had taken her out and kissed her. And if it had not been her, it would have been some other woman who took his fancy.

True, he'd trailed the party and protected her, and she was grateful. But she could see that he had been hoping for the run-in, for the chance to vent his brute savagery.

She went to bed, knowing now that she'd go back East and marry Paul.

The thing happened suddenly, without warning, within the week. That morning when she went to school, there was not a breath of gossip. When she drove back that evening, the flyers for the sale were all over town. Red was selling his ranch and cavvies, a week Saturday.

She stared at the signs with consternation. His whole life had gone into that ranch.

Lillian went home and the Widow Watts said little, but she could feel the older woman's criticism building up like a stormhead.

She made a bewildered gesture with her hands. "But why's he selling out like that?" she asked.

"Just possibly," the widow told her on a subdued harsh note, "because no real man would stay around beyond decent limits eating his heart out."

*"His heart?"* The girl laughed.

The widow's stern look sobered her.

"I don't understand," Lillian said. "I said nothing critical to him over that . . . terrible incident."

"Did you tell him that he did well?" the widow asked. "Did you tell him he was right in what he did?"

Lillian bit at her underlip. "I didn't get much chance," she murmured.

"You've had near a week for chance," the widow said. "You can drive, you can ride, you can write. You could have let him know." Then her anger came unpent, and it was in her louder, harsher voice. "Don't you know a man can't be right with

himself when he's not right with his woman?"

Lillian turned and ran to her room, emotions choking her throat full.

All night long she chased her confused and conflicting thoughts in a circle. Then, at sunup, one of Red's riders came, driving a wobbly little colt.

"It's an orphan," he told her, "and Red didn't know any place it would get proper care except with you. He said mebbe you'd make it your prize pupil."

She swung suddenly to the cowboy. She said "Slim, tell him it will be my prize pupil. And Slim . . . tell him something else. Tell him I had Steve's gun when I was standing on the rim, but I was afraid to use it. But tell him I would have."

The widow stared at her. She said, "You, Lillian?"

The girl nodded, and went on to her room.

She sat down at her desk with her eyes shining, picked up her pen and wrote,

*Dear Paul . . .*

*And then—I don't know of any way to tell you of what happened, and if I did, you'd not approve. I will not be back, Paul. Forgive me.*

*Lil*

She folded the paper, and addressed and sealed the envelope. Then she looked back out the window. Land of peace and beauty, land of treachery and violence. Her land, though. Her gaze shifted off to where Red's ranch lay. He was wild, merciless, rough . . . but so gentle. Even when he was angry enough to clear out, he'd thought of her.

A big, tough, red-headed, downright dangerous galoot.

Her man, too.

She stamped the letter to mail on the way as she rode out to him. ♥ ♥ ♥

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# HORSEBACK

# Cowgirl

*High are the mountains and low is the plain;*
*Sweet is the sunshine, but sweeter the rain*
*That buds the green grass where the starved cattle graze*
*On valley and hill all the long summer days.*

*Oh, fair are the foothills in pine-patterned shade,*
*But fairer and sweeter by far is the maid*
*Who rides by my side at the high mesa's rim,*
*So brown-eyed and modest, so smiling and slim.*

*Her hair is the brown of an autumn-touched oak,*
*And soft as the fur of a rabbit to stroke.*
*Her voice flows as soothing and quietly sweet*
*As creek water cooling a tired horse's feet.*

*Her pony's a cow horse, her saddle well worn,*
*Her levis wear patches where they have been torn,*
*For she's a young cowgirl who rides like a man,*
*But kisses as only a Western girl can—*

# TROUBADOUR

By S. OMAR BARKER

*With lips and a heart that can savvy the life*
*She may have to lead as a cowpuncher's wife:*
*A life none too easy, with luxuries few,*
*But a free life, a good life, with love always true!*

*Her name doesn't matter, the bloom of her health*
*Is more to a cowboy than title or wealth,*
*And more to his heart that her feelings belong*
*With sun on the sage and a meadowlark's song.*

*Oh, gay is the fluting of blackbirds in fall,*
*But my sweetheart's laughter is gayest of all*
*The hope-happy sounds that a cowboy can hear,*
*As time for a real ranch wedding draws near!*

*Sweet is the sunshine, but sweeter the rain*
*That promises grass on the range once again,*
*And sweetest of all for the lone trails I ride*
*Is one little cowgirl to lope at my side!*

# BRAND THAT COWBOY!

## By T. J. ROEMER

EMMA WINTON was taking the last pan of biscuits from the oven when Julene, her sister, called excitedly from the rear stoop, "Pa's coming, Em. He's back from Fargo with a new hired hand." Philosophically, Emma put the biscuits on the window sill, checked the stove damper, then glanced at the calendar.

Ten days. Two more than it had taken pa to find a husband for Donna. They must be getting harder to find. Or did he want to be particularly sure about a man for Julene, she being the youngest of the family? Without taking off her apron, she went out onto the stoop.

"Inside with you, Julene, and brush up your hair. You look like a witch."

When Julene had gone, Emma sighed and shaded her blue eyes against the glare of the Dakota sun. Pa's rig, all right. And the bays were stepping along right handsome. And there was a man on the buckboard seat beside pa. She wondered, with a small stirring of excitement in her own breast, what he'd be like.

Her pa wasn't fooling her. Julene didn't know anything about these things—she was only eighteen—but Emma, who was almost twenty-six, had seen it happen three times now. First with Helen, then with Rose, and finally with Donna. Come spring, when the pressure of work would be off Ed Winton's husky shoulders, he'd hie himself off to some place, generally taking a train to Fargo, select a hired man and bring him to the Cross E where he had five pretty, motherless daughters.

And it had worked each time. Before the fall threshing was done, the hired hand, who already had passed Ed Winton's steady, judging eye months before, would up and get married to one of the Winton girls. And, Emma knew, to the very girl her pa had selected. Oh, he never breathed a word about it to her or anybody, but Emma knew the folks around didn't call Ed Winton the shrewdest horse trader in the country for nothing.

And now it was Julene's turn. Last year her pa hadn't gone—Julene was too young. But now she was eighteen and just nicely turned ready for marriage.

Once again Emma sighed, and when the prairie wind blew a lock of her wheat-colored hair across her face, she drew it back instinctively and faced into that warm wind that she'd known since she'd been a girl. Her mother had died when Emma was twelve, and Ed Winton, the biggest wheat raiser and cattle rancher in the county, would have no other woman in his house. "Let Em do it," he would say. Or, "Let Em decide," or, "Em will take care of it." Always it was Em. She'd baked and scrubbed and cooked and run the household like a woman ten years older than her age. She cared for her four younger sisters and raised them, and when they'd be-

**Had the stranger from Montana brought happiness to lonely Emma—that was to die with their first kiss?**

She wasn't conscious of anything but his arm around her. . . .

come young ladies of eighteen or nineteen and her father commenced bringing home eligible, steady young men, it was up to Em to keep things right and the course of things smooth.

She had guessed her father's strategy the first time when he had brought home that quick-smiling, dark Joey Freling and had so pointedly introduced him to Helen. After that, her father's motives were like an open book to her—that tall, slow-speaking red-headed Kansan for Rose, the energetic, quick-learning boy from St. Paul for Donna—her father had a knack for just matching right.

And now she wondered whom he'd chosen for Julene, the baby.

The bays came prancing over the nearest rise. Her father's steady hand tooled them into the grass-brown yard. "Hi, Em. Where's Julene?"

Em smiled. Her father wasn't being very subtle about it this time. "In the house. She'll be right out." And she stepped off the stoop, her eyes alert as the two men descended from the buckboard.

At first she was disappointed. He was big, almost too big a man for Julene. His arm muscles showed huge beneath the wash-faded, rolled-up blue sleeves. His eyes were wide and quiet, and almost the color of his shirt—a washed, sky-blue color. His skin was golden, a boyish color, and it somewhat matched his ragged yellow hair, now darkened with sweat, she saw, as he pushed up his dusty hat.

He's quite old for her, Emma thought swiftly. Why, he must be almost as old as I am. And then a half grin, boyish, bashful, touched his golden cheeks as he looked down at her, and Emma knew she had guessed wrong. He couldn't be over twenty-one.

"Em," her father said, "this is John Bruels—Big John, they call him. He's going to be with us through harvest. John, this is my oldest daughter, Emma. She runs the ranch. She can do everything from baking the best biscuits you ever sunk your teeth into, to helping me heist a grain box over a wagon's bolsters. Julene! Julene!" Her father raised his voice.

Emma shook hands with John Bruels. "Don't mind pa. He likes to brag." She turned and stepped out of the way as Julene came flying out the veranda door. And Emma caught her breath.

Julene maybe didn't know her father's intentions, but she certainly was at an age to know what attracted men's attention when a girl is eighteen. She'd slipped into the blue-print dress Emma had just completed for her, the neckline cut just so, on Julene's orders. It now showed off her pretty young figure. And Julene had done more than run a comb through her wavy brown hair. She'd brushed it up until it shone in the late afternoon sunlight, and it framed her small, pretty face with a dusky aura no male, single or married, could or would miss. And then he'd take a second look.

And this is just what young John Bruels did. His wide blue eyes looked down into Julene's brown eyes. A slow color came from the V of his blue shirt and swept up his strong neck into his bright-burned cheeks.

Emma heard her father's soft, exultant chuckle.

"John, this is my youngest daughter, Julene. Wait until you taste her burnt potatoes. I'll have to raise your wages to keep you. Julene, this is John Bruels, the new hand until harvest is over."

John Bruels didn't know whether to extend his big hand or not; as he unhesitatingly had done when Emma had thrust forward her hand. Finally he did, and Julene had smiled up at him, and John Bruels was blushing like a schoolboy. Suddenly Emma felt sorry for him.

She said, "Get the team unhitched, pa. You, John Bruels, come in and wash up before pa. I'll get supper right on. Skip, Julene, and get the cream pail out of the

well." In a moment she had them all dispersed and doing things. The greeting of Big John Bruels to the Cross E ranch was over with.

THE big, slow-speaking "kid", as Emma regarded him, soon displayed himself as a top-notch ranch hand. The first day, he shod the two driving mares, doctored a sick calf and reset the gate and posts of the breaking corral. And Emma was as pleased with him as she saw her dad was. For supper that night Emma had a special treat of light fluffy shortcake heaped with wild berries she had gone out and picked in Strawberry Slough that afternoon. She topped it with huge spoonfuls of heavy whipped cream, and Ed Winton patted his thick middle and sighed when the meal was over. Then, Emma noted, he lost no time in advancing the cause of Julene.

"There's a dance in Freedom tonight, John. Thought maybe you'd like to take it in an' get acquainted with our little town." His bland, gray-shadowed eyes roved around the table from the big, silent young hand, flitted over Emma seated at the foot of the table, and finally came to rest upon slim, dark Julene.

Emma promptly took her cue. "I have a slight headache from picking those strawberries this afternoon, but I'm sure Julene will go in with you, John, and introduce you around."

His wide, bleached brows went up hesitantly as he looked across the table, and Julene flushed and looked down at her plate.

Emma said quickly, "Don't wait for the dishes, Julene; I'll do them. You run and get dressed. And, John, you don't have to dress up fancy; we're plain folk around here and, as you'll see, Freedom's dance will be strictly cowtown. Pa, you hitch up the bays for them." And, with her large capable ways, Emma bounced up and began clearing the dishes from the red-checkered table.

A minute later Julene called her into the bedroom.

"Gee whiz, Em, I had a date with Ray Sandusky in town tonight. I don't want to be thrown at this big oaf's head."

"You do like I say," Emma whispered. "This kid is no fool, and he's a mighty handsome male, too, if you ask me. He's got it all over that pimply-faced Sandusky kid like a three-stack tarp."

"But—but he's so bashful—and clumsy—"

"Tut-tut. Give him a chance, girlie, and you'll find out. I know men. And when a gal is as pretty as you, they don't need much come-on. Just remember, little one, there's limits to womanly teasing and this John Bruels won't be as easy to hold off as that weak-muscled Sandusky kid who gets his strength clerking in a grocery store. So watch your step."

She left the bedroom feeling like an old woman, giving that kind of advice. She stood for a moment, her capable, smooth arms akimbo, and looked at her figure in long kitchen mirror. She had nice hips and shoulders—maybe a bit square—but there certainly was nothing wrong with her waistline. Her waist measurements were almost as small as Julene's—and she was eight years older! Why, if Julene didn't want—She brushed the thought from her mind. Julene would. Just wait and see. Her dad was never wrong. And, then, after Julene was gone it would be *her* turn. She whisked back a lock of her wheat-colored hair and resolutely tackled the dishes.

She saw them off. They made a beautiful couple, John Bruel so wide and tall with a black string tie showing starkly from a white shirt. He wore no hat. His yellow hair was well brushed down, ragged a little only at the ears and the nape of the neck. Emma saw it blowing slightly in the evening wind. A terrible urge came into her breast to reach out and smooth it down. She didn't move. She stood on the back stone stoop and waved as he gave slim

Julene a hand into the red-wheeled buggy.

What a pair they made! Julene like a wisp—dark, slender, her blue, full dress rustling beneath her cape. The cameo, a jewel at her slender neck, the black ribbon accentuating her pearly skin. How could any man resist? Emma shivered. She turned and hurried into the house.

She couldn't sleep that night. The curlews were crying out on the prairie. Soft light feathered the rolling hills. Stars came low and a coyote cried from the brushy creek up Stangler's way. Emma turned her feverish body to look out the south screen. Freedom's lights winked low on the horizon four miles away. She wondered what was the matter with her. She was so warm she slipped out of her night dress and lay bare beneath the sheet, and she tried not to think of Julene and John Bruels at the dance, or worst of all—coming home. He was so big, so strong, he would crush her. Why did God make man so big? He was too big for Julene.

She heard the dining room clock strike eleven, then twelve. . . . He'd be bringing her home now. She waited, listening, tense—and then she heard the bays. She recognized their hoofbeats. The buggy stopped beside the kitchen door. She heard John Bruels's husky voice quiet the horses, she heard Julene's low laughter. Then there was silence. After a while Julene said something and laughed once more, more softly this time. Emma heard the springs of the buggy creak; and she wanted to pull the pillow over her head and drown out the sound. Something was tearing inside her breast. She wanted to open her mouth and scream, "No! No!" But all she did was lie rigid beneath the single sheet and hold the cloth tight up against her chin and keep her eyes closed hard. This was the way her father wanted it.

After a while Julene came in. John Bruels put the team away. And Emma, across the room from Julene's bed, didn't move, pretending sleep. The last chime of the dining room clock that she remembered was three.

Julene slept late the next morning, as usual after a dance, but Emma was up the minute she heard her father stirring. She made oatmeal for breakfast and was surprised when the kid appeared in the stairwell almost at once. He was dressed in work clothes. She said good morning and he answered her and then was silent. Her father came in, was surprised also that John Bruels was up that early, and the three had breakfast, Ed Winton's square-wrinkled face looking very pleased.

But at the end of the meal John Bruels put down his drained coffee cup and said in that slow way he had of talking, "Mr. Winton, I'm going to quit."

"Quit?" Silence fell. The pleased lines drained from her father's face, then in one of the few times Emma heard her father cuss, Ed Winton said, "Hell's fire, man! You just got here! What's the gripe?"

John Bruels's soft-stubbled, pink cheeks grew a deeper pink.

"I just want to quit, is all," he said stubbornly. But he did involuntarily shift his eyes toward the girls' bedroom.

Emma caught it, but she was sure her father hadn't because he was frowning at his coffee. Emma felt an uneasy puzzlement. What was the reason?

Her father spoke. "I hired you for the season, Bruels, until after harvest. I don't want you to quit now, and I don't expect you to unless you can give me a very good reason. What is it?"

Again silence. John Bruels grew pinker. His quiet, sky-blue eyes grew stubborn. He wouldn't say anything.

"Then I expect you to stay on, Bruels," her father said gruffly, breaking the strained emptiness. "But I will raise your wages from twenty-five to thirty dollars a month. Is that all right now?"

The big young hand, whom Emma all the more now regarded as a kid, finally nodded his head. He muttered:

"All right. I'll stay on."

JOHN BRUELS worked like a titan. Emma's dad was putting up the wild slough hay, and where Emma helped him before while Julene did the housework and the cooking, after a fashion, this John Bruels now did the work of two men. He could make a seasoned ash pitchfork bend with huge forkfuls of hay; he could keep her father a-sweating and humping on the stack or hay rack and he himself wouldn't even be half trying. Once when the hay rack bogged in the slough, Bruels practically lifted the rear wheels out and shoved rack, horses and all out of the hole to solid footing. Oh, he was a real hand, Emma saw, and she cooked extra dishes and fancy desserts—whipped cream and cherry pies, double-layer chocolate cakes with lemon meringue filling, rhubarb sauce sweetened on hot baking powder biscuits. But about that first night she couldn't get anything from Julene.

"Oh, he's just a big oaf," Julene would say tartly.

Emma said, "I suppose you think that skinny Sandusky kid is the right sort of Romeo."

Julene would poutingly thrust forth her ripe underlip and go about peeling the potatoes or whatever minor chore she was doing.

Toward the end of the week Clem Oden dropped in. Clem was a bachelor with a ranch half a dozen miles to the east of the Winton place. He was on his way to Freedom.

At the sound of the saddle horse in the yard, Emma came out onto the stoop, drying her arms. She had been washing the kitchen linoleum.

"Dad's down back of the barn breaking in a pair of colts." She said it quite shortly. She had no time for Clem Odin. He was a wide, heavy man with an always unshaven black stubble and a dirty, greasy look about him. He was past forty but at that had tried to make love to Emma every time she'd gone to a dance or party in Freedom —until she had told him off and Ed Winton had clinched it with a terse, "Stay away from Em or you'll answer to me."

"I didn't want to see your pa," Odin said with a greasy smile. "Thought I'd just drop in and see how things are going on the Winton Marryin' Ranch. Heard your pa picked up a new sucker."

Emma considered herself a pretty even-tempered girl, but now she felt the burn all the way down her throat and at once full-bloomed through all her chest. She didn't know why; she didn't stop to analyze the reason, but she took one step off the stone porch and pointed an angry finger toward the road-gate.

"Get out of here, Clem Odin. And don't come back, or I'll have my dad throw you off." Her words trembled with her anger.

Odin sneered and wheeled his black horse, and Julene came onto the stoop.

"What did he want?"

"Nothing," Emma said. She marched back into the kitchen. She was glad Julene hadn't heard.

One of the colts had a mean streak along with an extra dose of devilment and at supper that night her father, against John Bruels's advice, decided to use a Spanish bit on him the next day. "I haven't got one on the place so ride in tonight, John, and pick one up at Kutsky's hardware. Charge it to my account."

John Bruels went. He rode one of the bays in. And Emma, watching him, tall in the saddle against the setting sun, marveled at the way he could ride. He had once said he'd been a cowboy out in Montana and had done several winters riding down in Wyoming. For a youngster he had been around, and for the hundredth time she wondered how old he was. He couldn't be such a kid as he appeared.

John Bruels was back in two hours with the Spanish bit. He also had a mouse under his right eye, a jagged nail scar the

length of his pink, solid jaw, a bump the size of a horseshoe calk on his broad forehead, and his shirt was in ribbons and his levis half torn from his right leg.

He flung the Spanish bit onto the table next to the newspaper Ed Winton had been reading and said, "I'm quitting." He turned and stamped out of the house, and still frozen with amazement Emma sat motionless with the darning basket on her lap, and she heard the yard pump creak and water splash.

Ed Winton swore under his breath as he stared at his two daughters. "Now what the devil happened to him?" He arose and went out to the yard pump where John Bruels was washing up. They could hear their father talking, questioning, urging an answer. But John Bruels said nothing. He came stamping back into the house.

He was almost to the stairs when Julene said, "Looks like you took the worst end of it."

He whirled. Emma had never seen so much fire in his sky-blue eyes before. "I'll have you know, ma'am, when I got through with him they had to lift him onto his black horse and tie him to the saddle to keep him in."

Emma came to her feet. *"Clem Odin!"*

Her father turned. "That fellow around here again?" Sharply.

"Yes, he was in the yard this afternoon. He—he rather insulted me. I got furious and ordered him off the place."

John Bruels stood motionless, staring at her. "He insulted you?"

Under his level gaze, Emma strangely felt herself grow warm. "Why—yes. He said something to me no woman would ever want to hear."

John Bruels took a deep breath. "Then I reckon, Mr. Winton, I'll stay on." He turned and went up the stairs to his room, closing the door behind him.

Ed Winton sat down heavily before his paper. He scowled, looking at Julene, then picked up the newspaper, but Emma knew he wasn't reading. And Emma knew for once her father's plans weren't working out as he'd desired.

A short while later Ed Winton retired to his bedroom and Emma was left alone with Julene. Emma said, "What made you say that, Julene? That angered him, quick."

"The big oaf. I didn't think he could even fight."

"If he licked Clem Odin, he can fight all right. What happened between you and him that first night you went to a dance in Freedom?"

"Nothing," Julene said tartly, and she flipped a page of the fashion magazine she was reading.

"Something must have happened. He—he acts so—well, rather queer toward you." Emma wished she could find better words. She wanted to soften Julene, help her father's cause along. But Julene's ruby-red underlip began creeping out, and Emma realized she'd better leave well enough alone. Maybe the breech still could be healed. She decided to be a little more tactful in helping matters along.

She coaxed Julene into finishing a green cotton dress that had been cut out, and she got Julene to model it for her father one evening.

JULENE looked lovely. Her dark hair and ruby lips picked up the yellow rays from the kitchen wall lamps. She pirouetted, flashing neat ankles, and her arms were pale ivory among the flares of the dark green skirt.

"And, dad," Emma said, "she made it all by herself, practically. Doesn't she sew neatly?"

Her father's wrinkled eyes laughed. He said, "Julene, that dress is beautiful."

Emma slid her gaze toward John Bruels, who was reading *The Stockman's Magazine,* and her exultation vanished. He hadn't even looked up.

But Emma didn't give up trying. She coaxed Julene into cooking one meal a day,

and then helped her prepare extra little tidbits. "And watch the potatoes, Julene, for Pete's sake! Never let them burn. If there's anything a man hates, it's burnt potatoes."

"Say, what is this? I don't want to get my face and hands all red and scrubby before Sally Born's wedding dance next week."

"Now you do as I say and be a good girl and I'll do all the housework the entire week after."

Julene shook her tousled dark hair. "I don't get it, Em, but it's a good trade—half a week's work for a whole one."

At every meal Emma would make some casual remark about the fresh shortcake Julene had prepared, or the hot gingerbread Julene had just whipped up, or the new, tender way the steak was done that night which Julene had found in an old cookbook. And Emma saw her father leaning on every word and hungrily waiting for the least indication of appreciation from the stolid young hand seated across the table from him. But John Bruels ate swiftly, hungrily, as a working man does, and he always left the table with never a word about the food. Emma sighed. And then she'd try something else. She wouldn't give up. Her father never had been wrong before.

The twenty-fifth came, a Wednesday, the day of the Sally Born wedding dance, and Emma was still trying, still hoping. She'd made ice cream that noon, and told the white lie that Julene had dug the ice from the icehouse, cracked it up, and whipped the cream. Now it was evening and the men would soon be in from the field. It was Julene's turn to make supper but Emma was "helping" her. Julene had gone to the well to get the sweet coffee cream. Emma heard the kitchen door open behind her Then John Bruels's slow, deep voice said, "Hello." She whirled.

"Oh, I thought you were Julene."

He was breathing deeply, as if he'd been running, or working hard. There were three big drops of moisture straight above his bleached brows. His wide, sky-blue eyes were looking straight at her, but there was a scared look in them. His big hands hung loosely at his levi sides.

"I—uh—" He suddenly grabbed the drinking dipper and scooped it, brimming, from the water can. He drank furiously, but his eyes didn't leave her. She wiped her hands on the blue apron, unmindful of the flour crumbs falling on her clean floor. The air was awfully still, suddenly, to her. His drinks were gulps, noisy, spilling a little water alongside his broad silken jaws.

The dipper was empty. She didn't know what to do. She dropped the apron and started toward the oven. He moved forward. One big arm went out, around her waist. He was at her back, trying clumsily to turn her. He didn't say anything but his breathing rattled in his throat.

She felt a million pinpricks race over her skin. The feeling touched her at every point in her body, and she took a breath and couldn't seem to breathe again. She was floating. There was something strange and tickling way down deep inside her. It hurt. Her heart hurt. She wasn't conscious of anything but that arm around her and that big young man behind her.

And then she remembered. Her father . . Julene. . . Like a cat, she whirled out of his arms and back against the spice pantry. She opened her blue eyes wide, and flung a strand of wheat-colored hair from her warm face. She said:

"Why—why, John Bruels—"

His big pink face looked aghast. The glow went from his eyes. Red choked up his thick neck. His great hands went to his shirt collar and pulled it wide, as if he were seeking air. Then he muttered:

"I—uh—I reckon I'm sorry." He bolted for the outdoors.

Emma sank against the spice cupboard. She wanted to cry.

* * *

John Bruels didn't ask Julene to go to

the dance with him that evening, in spite of her father's very pointed suggestions that tomorrow they'd lay off work and tonight was a very beautiful night for a dance and some fun. And it was up to Ed Winton himself to give in to Julene's coaxings to take her into Freedom to the dance. Emma said nothing, but directly after they left, John Bruels came down stairs from his room and went outside. She didn't hear him take the spare buggy, nor saddle a horse, but he was gone. Sitting alone on the south screened porch with all the Dakota night and stars about her, Emma had never felt so lonely in all her life.

She heard her father and Julene come in that night and she waited to hear John Bruels. But the dining room clock chimed off the growing morning hours and he didn't come.

At breakfast the following morning she asked her father where John was. Ed Winton was astounded. No, he hadn't seen him at the dance nor in town. Maybe Bruels was in his room, had returned without being heard.

But John Bruels was not in his room, and Ed Winton returned to the kitchen with shadows of deep disappointment in his face.

"He's gone, Em."

She felt for her father. For once he had guessed wrong. Maybe not so much about the man—John Bruels was all man, anyone could concede that—but, well, he and Julene just didn't hitch. So she said lightly, to ease the disappointment, "Julene is awful young yet, Dad. No hurry." And she went about clearing the dishes.

For some reason or other, to Emma that day began and dragged as no other day had for her in her life. She tried to keep busy, but at every task she started, her hands would in a moment fall idle, and minutes later she'd find herself staring off into space.

What in the world was the matter with her? What was she thinking of? Of course it was silly to think a man would stay at a place that he didn't like. But why didn't he like it here? Surely he was fed well. And work—it was child's play to him. Besides Ed Winton worked none of his men hard. John Bruels had a nice room to himself; it was kept spotless; it had corner windows and was cool sleeping nights. Then what in the world—

"Emma, what in the world?" Julene's voice echoed. "You're pouring sugar in the salt cellars!"

ABOUT eleven a rig pulled into the yard. Glancing out the window, Emma saw it was young Sandusky in his grocery buggy. She saw Julene run out, saw young Sandusky look around swiftly for Ed Winton, then not seeing him, throw his arms around Julene and press her back against the buggy, kissing her hard. Emma closed her eyes and turned quickly away. Those two kids . . . love. . . .

Then she heard young Sandusky say, "What happened to that big brute your dad had hired out here? He came into town last night and got stiffer than a poker. Still going this morning at Haley's saloon. No fights yet, but he's sure on the prod, and believe me. . . ."

Emma didn't hear any more. She thought for one long minute, and the sun was terribly soft and golden suddenly, and the seconds were precious, tinkling things. She took her hands from the dishwater, dried them swiftly and went into her bedroom.

When she came out a remarkable transformation had taken place. Gone was the girl in the blue-checkered housedress with dampened wheat-colored hair carelessly pinned up in haste to get work done. Gone were house shoes, the apron, the wet dishtowel. And gone was the harassed, frowning stare from Emma Winton's flax-blue eyes.

She wore the cowgirl riding outfit in which she'd won ladies' top riding honors at the Stockman's Fair in Minot three years

ago. Her golden hair was brushed fine and showed a roll beneath the black, silver-banded hat cocked on the back of her head. The leather chin-strap hung loose down her neck at the divided white blouse that had fancy stiching over the pockets and down the gauntleted cuffs. She wore a divided black riding skirt that fitted snugly over her hips and then flared out loosely over soft-leather riding boots that had silver stars punched in hand-tooled tops. But most of all the change was in Emma Winton's eyes, the tilt of her chin, in the very way she walked. She was a girl who knew what she wanted and was going after it.

"Why, Em!" Julene said, on seeing her. "What—where are you going?"

"To try to pick up something you threw away." And she strode out to the corral and threw bit and saddle onto her riding bay, and she headed up the road to Freedom.

At the end of the main drag she pulled the bay out of the lope and sat, hesitating. She knew what she wanted to do, but how? She shook out the reins and walked up the wide and unlovely main drag of the small Dakota town. The postmaster saw her, tipped his hat, then turned and stared. Men before the hitching rack at Connor's Livery tipped their hats and stared. She rode past. A clump of horses were standing hip-shot in the sun before Haley's tie-rail. She walked the bay steadily in that direction.

She came before the tie-rail and reined up her horse. Now what? She'd never been in a saloon in Freedom in her life.

Somebody saw her through the window on the bar side, and that person came to the door. It was Clem Odin with a mug of beer in his hand.

"He's in here all right, my fine and high lady. Dead drunk, and you ought to see him." Odin's face showed some fresh bruises, but he was grinning.

"There's a first time for everything, Emma Winton," she muttered to herself, and swung off and walked stoutly up the plank steps into Rus Haley's saloon.

Even Odin was astounded. The dozen other men fell back and were silent. Ed Winton's oldest daughter was respected in Freedom. But Odin swiftly recovered. He waved the beer mug.

"Back there, your highness."

She looked into the rear dimness. John Bruels sat, or rather lay, at a card table, his face flat, one arm hanging, the other half over his head. He was sleeping in a dead-drunk.

Then Emma stifled a cry. If his face had been beaten up that other time, it was hammered this time. Even in the dimness and half covered by one meaty hand, it showed a mass of red slashings.

She whirled on Odin.

"You must have stamped on his face! And he was drunk."

"Ma'am," Odin said with a mock bow, "when a man drinks he takes his own chances. He *might* get into a fight."

Fury boiled through Emma. She stiffened. "Odin, if I had a blacksnake, I'd quirt you into the dirt of this floor." She turned and marched to the table and shook John Bruels's heavy shoulder.

"John, wake up. Get out to the ranch."

John Bruels stirred. She shook him again. Slowly he twisted up his head. His sky-blue eyes rimmed with red fist and heel marks, stared.

"Don't you know me, John? Emma Winton. Dad needs you out there to break those colts."

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John Bruels stared. "You—you came in to get me?"

"Yes. Can you walk? No, take my horse. I'll get one at Connor's."

*"You—came in to tell me—to come back?"*

"Yes, John. Can you walk—"

The big hand closed on the table edge beneath his face. One swoop and the table went over. John Bruels was on his feet. He didn't weave. The little sleep he'd had, the beating last night, or something, now suddenly drained the liquor fumes from his fogged head. He spoke, and his voice was the same slow, deep tone once more.

"Why, yes, Miss Emma, I can walk. But would you mind stepping outside first?" The sky-blue eyes had fastened on someone up the barroom.

Emma hesitated, worried, then saw his straight step. "Why, yes, John, I will wait outside for you." She smiled.

As she walked out the door, she saw Clem Odin fling the beer mug. It missed John Bruels. John Bruels kept walking forward. Odin kept backing up. Down the bar his hand grabbed up a whiskey bottle. He flung it. John Bruels ducked it easily, lightly. There was no mistaking the soberness of the man now. Something had brought him miraculously to his completed senses. And Clem Odin was the first man to recognize that. He remembered the terrible power of this man's fists the other day when he had been sober. Clem Odin turned and raced back of the bar, ducked under the board at the curve of the bar, and ran out the saloon's side door.

John Bruels straightened. He grinned. The men in the saloon burst out laughing.

Emma was waiting on the boardwalk when he came out.

"Something funny?"

He grinned. "I must look a sight."

"You're—" She checked herself. She almost said, "Beautiful." She said quickly, "You look all right. Here's my horse. I'll get one at Connor's."

"Wait." He stood straighter, straighter than she had ever seen him before. There was something new about him, some inner newness. He looked down directly into her eyes, and he said in his slow way, "I know I'm a mess and it's broad daylight in Freedom but what's wrong in riding double out to the ranch? It's only a couple of miles."

"Double? You—and me?"

"That's what I was thinking of ma'am—I mean Miss Emma."

"Just Emma," she said softly, and moved to the bay.

And the postmaster stared, and the loafers before Connor's Livery stared, and a man who'd stopped running back in an alley stared.

But John Bruels and Emma Winton didn't see any of them.

In the first coulee the bay stopped. Emma had seen John Bruels gently make the motion on the reins. She leaned back in the saddle and his arms around her closed tightly. She turned her head upward and when she felt his lips on hers she thought the bay had taken off and was galloping through the sky.

Finally she twisted loose, laughing softly. "This will sure be a good joke on horse-trader Ed Winton. You know pa got you for Julene."

"I dunno," John Bruels said slowly. "Julene isn't my kind an' your pa knows it. Julene is—is sorta too forward." He blushed as he said it.

Emma laughed and squeezed his big arms. "Go on, John."

"A long time ago your pa told me about that other place he had for rent over in the hills. Then, later, he made a mention now an' then about putting up with burnt potatoes until young Sandusky takes Julene off his hands, he supposed. You don't reckon your pa was fooled?"

Emma opened her eyes wide. "Poor dumb, blind me. It was *my* turn," she whispered. And she crept into her man's arms. ♥ ♥ ♥

# SEASONAL SALLY

Sally is merry on Christmas Day,

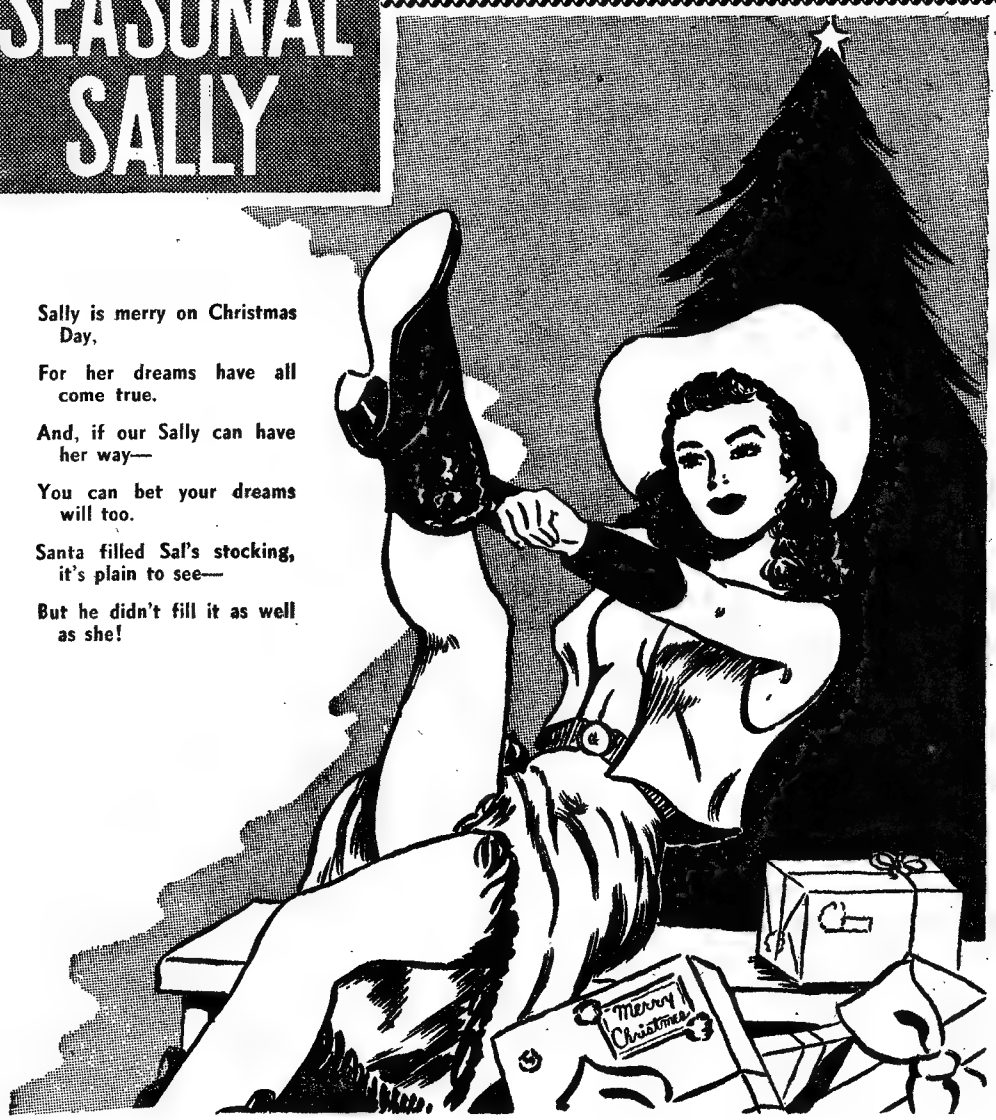
For her dreams have all come true.

And, if our Sally can have her way—

You can bet your dreams will too.

Santa filled Sal's stocking, it's plain to see—

But he didn't fill it as well as she!

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# A KISS FOR KATIE

By GWEN CHOATE

THE skittish stallion trotted roughly over the rocks of Clearview Ranch, whinnying uneasily at the light, strange figure who sat so erectly on his back. Katie O'Neill gripped the reins and strained her violet blue eyes against the dusky approach of evening. She struggled to keep her firm Irish chin up, but her lips trembled. Lips that always looked a little too full and curvy to be quite decent, Clay had said. She drew them tight and looked hard at the ground.

Her small tanned face showed the strain of a day's riding. Crisp black hair, streaked with dust, tumbled about her shoulders and turned under her chin in maverick curls. Katie sighed, pushing her hat back wearily.

She looked over the endless dry ranch land that Uncle Dan had left her. It seemed as if she'd never been away to school. She felt the same as when she left two years ago—that nothing could ever mean as much to her as Uncle Dan, who had raised her, and his beautiful Clearview Ranch.

Tears stung her eyes and tangled in the thick lashes. Katie brushed them away with the back of her hand. She couldn't lose this place! Being a girl shouldn't make that much difference. She was eighteen, healthy and full of the determination of the Black Irish. This was her home, and she meant to keep it. If Clay Webster couldn't manage it, she would. And nothing was going to stop her. Not the army worms that ate the roots away in scarce pasture land, not the unrelenting drouth that parched the grass, not Mr. Helvis and the mortgage he held.

**Katie didn't mind being an empty-headed flirt — if her arms were full of Ken. . . .**

Another tear welled up, but she shook her head angrily. "I won't give up." Briskly she prodded the horse and began to look over the ranch again. Somewhere, somebody was purposely planting those destructive worms in her pasture land, and she meant to keep riding and looking until she caught the low-down rannyhan.

She'd show Clay Webster, too. He needed a lesson. Tall, hard-jawed Clay, with eyes gray as a storm cloud and stiff brown hair as stubborn as the head it grew on. She'd liked him at first. He was kind and helpful after Uncle Dan died, offering to remain as foreman. In his quiet, strong way he gave her the courage she needed. He took her for long rides, showing her the land and telling of its problems. Once he almost kissed her.

She smiled in spite of herself. A sandracer whizzing past her foot had made her scream. Clay grabbed, pulling her away, and before she could explain, his arms were around her, hard and possessive, his stormy eyes tender, hurtingly close. Katie threw back her head in delicious abandonment, her arms drawing him closer, fiercely, ur-

"Clay!" Katie said breathlessly, her knees weak with relief. . . .

gently. She wasn't foolish and emotional, kissing every attractive man she met, but there was something about this gray-eyed cowpoke with the stubborn jaw.

And then she felt him pushing at her arms, gently but firmly. His face was flushed.

"I'm sorry," he said softly. "I shouldn't have done that. Guess the sun's too hot for me today. We're in two different classes, you and I."

Katie bit her her lip. "Two different classes?" she asked, annoyed.

He took her hands for a moment, his eyes going over the expensive riding habit she'd brought back from school. The tan wool riding breeches, the exquisite sea-green blouse with its deceptively simple tailored collar, the polished boots, the soft felt derby, all showed Katie O'Neill to be the beautiful young prep school girl, accustomed to the beautiful life a fond uncle had insisted on giving her.

Clay dropped her hands. "Very different. And I don't want you to think I'll go around trying to kiss you every time we are alone. It's just that you looked so darn cute, all flustered over a little old sand-racer." He laughed softly.

"I suppose it was amusing," Katie said coolly. Then she made herself shrug and smile brightly. "Don't let it worry you. I've been kissed before, and I'm sure I will be again." Abruptly she turned to walk toward some cows nearby, but not before she had seen Clay's shocked, angry face.

IT WAS that same night that she heard him telling the other cowboys over hot biscuits and steak that women weren't for him. Now a horse, a man could trust. They were always the same. Not like a flirtatious woman whose lips were too full and curvy to be quite decent.

Katie tightened her lips, feeling completely miserable, just remembering it. He thought she was a flirt and a hussy, too soft for ranch life. If he didn't know how she loved the place, how she'd hated leaving even for school, then let him think what he liked. She wouldn't lift a finger to change his mind.

A dusky figure moved in the adjoining pasture. Katie tensed, straining to see.

She nudged the stallion, slapping him with the reins at the same time. Excitement swelled within her. She was right. Someone was messing with the grass. The horse reared once and settled into a straight lope. If she could reach that man before he spotted her and got away, she'd learn something about who was planting army worms in her pastures. Maybe then Clay wouldn't be so quick to decide what class she belonged in. She urged the excited animal on. Now the intruder had looked up and was moving toward her with his hand up. Trying to hold her back, was he?

She heard a shout, then the horse hesitated and gave a leap. She was vaguely aware of sailing over a barbed wire fence. The stallion cleared it, then there was a jerk as his hind leg caught a barb. She pitched forward into the dirt with a thump.

The next thing she heard was Clay Webster's voice, soft and scared sounding.

"Baby, baby. It's all right. Are you hurt? Lie still. I'm here. Just lie still."

Katie was suddenly weak. The sound of that voice had a terrific effect on her. She kept her eyes closed, waiting for his kiss. She forgot her anger. Forgot about the ranch and its troubles. That man could put more caressing in a few words than any other man could in a whole love scene. She held up her arms, her heart thumping crazily.

"Clay. Oh, Clay—"

But nothing happened. There was a little surprised sound, and Katie opened her eyes wide, raising to her elbow. A furious blush stung her cheeks. Clay sat a few steps away, rubbing the stallion's cut leg and staring at her in amazement.

"Oh!" Katie took a quick glance and howled in anger. She wanted to claw his

face. He'd been talking to the horse all the time. The stupid, blind horse-lover!

Clay stood up, his eyes hard and angry. If he was aware that she had just taken a hard fall, it didn't show. He came straight toward her. Deliberately he yanked her up, his voice no longer tender.

"You little hellion! What's the idea? Taking my horse and trying to kill him. You think he can jump fences like those fancy palominos in that fancy school of yours?"

Katie gulped. "I—I didn't see—"

"You didn't see and you didn't care. You'd kill a good animal just to show off. What do you think this ranch is, a new place for you to play games?" He paused. In the semi-dark his eyes were hot steel over hers. It was the first time she noticed his hands clamped against her arms.

Anger stung her to action. Jerking back viciously, she swept her hand up to his cheek, hard. He lifted his chin, rubbing his face thoughtfully.

"Temper too. Crazy, flirtatious and high-strung. You are a misfit here, like a thoroughbred rubbing noses with a bunch of mustangs." He was close enough for her to see a little smile touch his lips.

"What you think of me," she said icily, "couldn't possibly matter less. The only reason I don't fire you now is that I've paid you in advance for two more months."

"That," he said quietly, "is exactly why I don't quit. But until I do, let's have this understood: I'm boss out here. Stop riding that stallion and stay out of my way while I'm fighting the worms."

Maybe you just don't want me snooping," she drawled. "Maybe you don't want the worms stopped." She hated herself for sounding so insulting, but he made her so darn mad!

Now his voice was loud. "You're being completely childish. If I wanted trouble for this ranch, all I'd have to do would be to leave you in charge for a few days. But I don't. *No, ma'am.* Dan was my friend. This place was in good shape when he hired me, and it will be when I leave."

"That can't be too soon for me," she snapped, whirling to stalk toward the ranch house. Behind her, she could hear Clay clucking solicitously to the stallion, gently urging him along. Katie set her teeth angrily.

"We'll see who can make trouble," she grated. "We'll see who's in charge of this ranch, when I get to town tomorrow."

KATIE O'NEILL stood with her pink-gloved fist raised to rap on the oak-paneled door of Mr. Helvis' office. She paused to glance at her reflection in the big mirror beside the door, and practiced a coquettish smile. She was like a new Katie.

Deep blue eyes, sparkling under the heavy fringe of lashes, thick black hair, brushed till it looked like new satin and pinned with an antique pearl clasp that let the curls beneath cascade to the nape of her neck. A pink saucy bonnet perched on top of her head, and a swishy pink gown with touches of scarlet at the neck and hemline.

Gingerly she lifted the full skirt, turning to view it sidewise. The soft material hugged her rounded curves and tiny waist, then swung out about the ankles. She leaned forward, poising a finger to smooth her reddened lips, then changed her mind and turned her head to one side, surveying her whole figure in the mirror.

Her curvy lips parted, showing her teeth in a tantalizing smlie. Maybe it would be fun being a hussy. After all, she'd been practically called one.

"H'mm—nice," a deep voice drawled from the doorway. "Awfully, awfully nice!"

Katie whirled to face a tall man with a graying mustache and slick hair who smiled at her from the doorway. Her cheeks burned with a guilty flush.

"Oh, I'm sorry." For an instant she wanted to run away in shame, but she stif-

fened her shoulders and smiled almost gaily. "You must be Mr. Helvis. I was just borrowing your mirror before I came in to call on you. I'm Miss O'Neill. Katie O'Neill," she amended softly.

The tall man bowed, a half-smile showing beneath his moustache. "I am Gerald Helvis, and I assure you I have never seen my mirror looking better." He pushed the door wide, gesturing for her to enter.

Katie hesitated, a tremulous feeling of doubt running through her. Perhaps she should make some excuse and leave. Clay had said he would handle the trouble at the ranch. But then she remembered his angry scolding about the stallion. Put the safety of a stupid horse ahead of her own, would he? Call her flirtatious and undependable, would he? No. He needed a lesson. He needed to see that Katie could manage the ranch quite well without his help.

She straightened her shoulders and hurried to the big chair beside Mr. Helvis' mahogany desk. The sound of the door closing sent another shiver of panic through her.

Mr. Helvis paused beside Katie, a knowing smile widening his lips. "I'm glad you came, my dear. I was worried about the trouble you've been having with the army worms and wanted to drive out to give you some advice. But"—he looked slightly uncomfortable for a moment—"your Mr. Webster doesn't take kindly to my professional assistance."

Katie tilted her chin. "I'm afraid Mr. Webster doesn't take kindly to anyone's assistance, Mr. Helvis, but since the ranch is mine, I mean to make all of its decisions in the future."

His pursed lips and lifted eyebrows said plainly that he was surprised. Suddenly he bent to take her hands between his palms. "How wise you are to do that. Believe me, if I had seen you earlier, I should have already been out to offer my help."

Katie withdrew her hand.

"I'm glad to hear you say that," she told him, "because that's exactly why I am here." She leaned forward, then, her eyes dark and pleading, and said, "You hold the mortgage. Tell me what I can do to save my ranch."

Mr. Helvis rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

Katie felt her cheeks go hot under his piercing gaze.

"Tell me, Katie," he said slowly. "How is Webster fighting the worms?"

"I think he is using some kind of poison," she said. She felt uneasy, remembering Clay as he rubbed the stallion's cut leg and vowed the ranch wouldn't be in trouble when he left it.

Mr. Helvis snorted. "Poison? Nonsense! Doesn't he know they will crop up in another area?" He slammed his big fist on the desk. "No. The thing to do is burn your pastures."

Katie stared at him, shocked. "I can't. The cattle would starve."

"Foolish child." He patted her hand. "You needn't burn all of it at once. Burn one side and drive the livestock to the other. By the time that side is fresh again, you can reverse the drive."

"I wonder what Clay would say," Katie mused.

Mr. Helvis waggled a finger. "I thought you made the decisions."

Katie lifted her dark head. "I do." A reckless desire came over her to show Clay Webster that she knew more about managing a ranch than he or anybody else. If this suggestion of Mr. Helvis' could help her do that, then she was willing to burn the pastures. After all, she had grown up on Clearview. It was an insult to call her a misfit.

Mr. Helvis was scrawling on some legal-looking papers with scratchy pen. Katie leaned forward to get his attention, remembering something.

"But half my note is due in a month. If I burn the pastures, the cows can't possibly be ready for market by then."

Mr. Helvis dipped his pen and scratched a final line, then pushed the paper toward her. "Of course you can't," he said. "I thought of that too. I'm familiar with your herd. Sign this, giving me title to half the cows, and your first payment is made. By the time the rest is due, your grass will be good again and the cattle can bring an excellent price."

She sat up sharply. "Sell half my cows? I don't think Uncle Dan would have—"

"Your uncle was my good friend," Mr. Helvis interrupted. "I am advising you to do exactly the thing I feel he would want. Here, read the agreement. You sell me the cows; I cancel half the debt against the ranch."

KATIE took the paper. As she read, Mr. Helvis moved close, solicitously. He turned pages, lifted the pen for her to sign, dusted the signature with powder, careful not to spill any on her dress. She felt herself relaxing. It was nice to be treated like a china doll, openly admired by an attractive man. She eyed his suave, mature face. He couldn't be over forty. She felt daring, letting him take her arm as she rose to leave. He smiled down at her, his eyes touching her full lips, the curve of her jaw, and moving down to her bare throat.

Katie felt uneasy again, but she forced herself not to pull away. "You have been kind to me," she said thoughtfully. "You're almost the only person in this whole crazy mess who has been kind."

The room was strangely quiet, and Mr. Helvis had an odd, amused smile on his face as they paused at the door. Without speaking, he slipped his hands slowly up her arms, drawing her close to him.

Good heavens, Katie thought wildly, he's going to kiss me!

And then his mouth, smooth and anticipating, was closing down on hers. He swept her lips insinuatingly, expertly, his arms subtly drawing her tighter against his wool-coated chest.

She should want this, she told herself grimly. He was the kind of man she needed—kind, successful and thoughtful.

Yet, when he leaned toward her again, she twisted away, pushing desperately against his arms, without quite knowing why.

Beautiful," he murmured hungrily. "You're beautiful." He pressed his warm lips against her ear, letting his kisses trail along her jawline and down to her smooth throat as she struggled against him.

"Please," she half-sobbed. "Oh, please don't." But he held her tighter.

Then suddenly the big door was opening. A big hand was pulling her from Helvis, leaving him shaken with surprise.

"Clay!" Katie said breathlessly, her knees weak with relief. "Clay, how did you—" But something in his face made her stop.

Gerald Helvis stepped forward, straightening his coat and pushing his smooth hair back. "You're on the wrong lease now, Webster."

Clay reached past him, grabbing Katie's arm. His lips were drawn tight, with little spots of white showing around them. "So is she." He pulled her toward him.

"Leave me alone," she said, close to tears. "L-leave me alone."

Clay crammed one of her hands under his arm and held it like a vise. "What have you told her?" he yelled at Helvis. "What crazy thing have you persuaded her to do?"

Katie tugged at her arm, growing angry. "Let me go, you—you horse-lover!"

Clay crumpled Helvis' elegant coat lapel with his free fist. "Leave her alone. If I ever see you touching her again, I'll come back and finish this job." He shoved the dark man backward.

Katie, watching Helvis, thought he suddenly looked soft and unclean.

She jumped as Clay turned to her again. "Are you coming with me quietly or shall I drag you out to my horse?"

Katie pulled experimentally at her arm. When he tightened his hold ominously, she shrugged and nodded.

He led her outside to the stallion, whose leg seemed none the worse for the scratch, shoved her up to the saddle and climbed behind, one arm fastened securely around her waist. She maintained an icy silence, leaning forward as much as she could, but when she realized that Clay was merely leaning with her, she relaxed against his shoulder.

The gentle jogging of the horse made her remember that she was very tired. She had slipped out of bed early, bribing one of the boys on the ranch to drive her into town. He must have told Clay, she thought suddenly, too weary to feel angry about it. They didn't talk. Clay's arm, close against her, rested her back, and before she knew it, she was almost asleep. Vaguely she remembered that she ought to tell Clay that she had sold the cows, but there would be time enough later.

THEY were in sight of the ranch when the sound of running horses came up behind them. Clay halted the stallion, pulling aside to watch them pass. His face was questioning.

"Helvis' men," he said slowly, wrinkling his forehead. "A dozen, at least. Seem to be going to Clearview."

Katie stiffened, remembering the papers she had signed. "Clay," she asked through dry lips, "are you sure they're his men?"

"Should be." His voice was hard. "I've run enough of them off Clearview in the past three weeks."

"Run them off? Have they been bothering our—my ranch?"

Clay took a deep breath. "More than that. I hadn't wanted to worry you, but I think they are the ones who bring the army worms in. I've caught them prowling but never actually got any proof. That's why I don't want you wandering all over the ranch. There's going to be a lot of trouble one of these days." He tightened his arm about her waist.

Katie closed her eyes against the electric thrill slashing through her. "But surely Mr. Helvis wouldn't do that. He was Uncle Dan's friend. He wanted to help me." She paused, waiting for his answer. When he didn't speak, she turned to see his face, frozen with disapproval.

"I know you don't like him, Clay," she went on softly. "I—I don't think I do, either, but if he was Uncle Dan's friend, surely—" A sudden thought made her stop.

"He was, wasn't he?"

Clay looked uncomfortable. "Katie, didn't you know?"

She shook her dark head. Clay tucked the rebellious curls under his chin protectively, his voice hushed.

"Katie, he's been after this ranch for two years. He brought on Dan's heart attack by threatening to foreclose. Dan hated him as he did few people."

Katie buried her face against his shoulder. She wanted to cry, the hurt was so great, but guilt and disgust with her own foolish pride kept the tears back.

She was a fool. For all of Uncle Dan's love and sacrifices, she had thanked him by tossing his ranch away. For Clay's loyalty she had given him a complete double cross. She lifted her burning eyes to his. Her heart lunged sickeningly, but she kept her voice steady with an effort.

"Clay, I know where the men are riding." She wished she didn't have to tell him. Wished it harder than she ever had anything.

"Katie?" The word was a frightened sound deep in his throat.

"I signed away half of the cows for the first note. Did it for spite, I think. Looks like he can't wait to collect from me." The tears came now, muffling her voice.

Clay didn't get angry. He didn't even act surprised. Just patted her shoulder absently while she sobbed softly against him. He held her close, resting his chin against

her hair, as if he were weighing matters.

"I wouldn't worry," he said gently. "It'll be a strain, trying to parlay half a herd into the money you'll be needing, but you'll do it somehow."

It hurt most because he sounded sorry for her. She was too big a fool to be worth scolding. She was just someone to pity.

* * *

Katie sat up in bed the next morning feeling that something was different. The sun, meshed through the big screened window beside her bed, made the sheets hot and uncomfortable. She stretched tentatively, then her eyes caught the pink dress she had worn, forlornly crumpled on a chair.

Suddenly she remembered.

She had spoiled everything. Clay had done his best, but she had spoiled it. He was right about her, too. She was a misfit, and a flirt and a high-strung filly. She hurried across the room to the crock basin where the handy-woman had poured fresh water. She splashed its coolness to her throat and temples. She looked again at the pink dress and grimaced. It reminded her of how foolish she had been. She pushed it aside and rummaged in her trunk. If she meant to act differently in the future, she might as well begin by dressing the part.

Clay was worth changing for. She glanced at her curved lips in the oval mirror and decided not to redden them. She didn't have the heart to put the heavy curls up in a bun, though, and there wasn't anything she could do about her eyelashes.

Downstairs on the back porch, Katie set down a half-empty cup of black coffee and finished eating a slice of smoked ham, sandwiched between a hot biscuit. She looked about for Clay eagerly. She felt trim and boyish in new blue levis and a blue plaid shirt, though the pants did fit a little tight and neither they nor the cotton shirt could do much to hide the curves. Still, she felt that he would like the change.

"Clay!" she called impatiently, noticing that the stallion wasn't grazing in his usual place by the barn.

"He's gone, ma'am," a quiet voice said beside her.

Katie turned to see a small boy with a staple tucked neatly in the corner of his mouth and a hammer swinging in his hand.

She bent toward him. "Gone to town?" An odd fear tugged at her.

The boy removed the staple from his mouth. "I mean *gone*. He left early with his bedroll."

Katie grabbed the boy's shoulders. "He can't be gone. He wouldn't go."

The boy winced and Katie dropped her hands.

"I'm sorry." Her voice was husky. "I shouldn't blame you."

She walked disconsolately back into the kitchen, her shoulders slumping.

FOR THE next week, Katie cried every night and went disconsolately about the ranch every day. Everything went wrong. She vowed over and over to forget Clay Webster and the mix-up he had brought into her life.

She learned it wasn't easy to run a ranch and that Clay had taken many duties off her shoulders that she hadn't known existed. It was hard to decide what kind of feed was best for the animals. When the men needed supplies, she dug deep into her cash because she didn't know how to insist on cut rates for large purchases. And most of all, she missed Clay himself.

He was stubborn and opinionated about women. And darned contrary about his horse! But he was kind in other ways. He'd even been wonderful about her foolish deal with Helvis. It must have been all pretense with him, since he walked out on her, but he had been kind and thoughtful on that ride home.

She worked as hard as the men did, put-

*(Continued on page 113)*

# POKER ALICE

*THE beautiful woman who came to be known as Poker Alice around the faro tables of the West was born in Sudbury, England, in 1851, the only daughter of a schoolmaster. Her name was Alice Ivers. How she came to the raw American frontier, turned to gambling for a living, and fell in love with a handsome faro dealer who swore to beat her at her own game, is a story, as they say, for the books.*

*When she was nineteen she came to Colorado, at the beginning of the silver boom, and married a young engineer who died within the year. Alice was alone in a frontier town teeming with miners, con men, thieves, and gun-fighters.*

*She took up gambling, and found she had a talent for it. Her eyes were a pale blue, and the card players around Lake City, Colorado, swore they turned as cold as gunmetal while they evaluated a man across the gaming table. She prospered at faro, and made a name for herself among the gambling fraternity. She learned to shoot, carrying a .38 and a .45 for protection.*

*From Lake City, Alice drifted about the West, eventually coming to Deadwood. It was here she met a handsome cardsharp named W. G. Tubbs.*

*"I mean to have that man," said Poker Alice to herself, gazing at the good-looking gambler with her cold blue eyes.*

*"A woman who needs to be taken down a peg or two," said Tubbs to himself, observing the beautiful girl with the icy eyes.*

*The miners flocked around Alice's table, for the sight of a woman was enough to draw them like flies. Alice's table outdrew Tubbs' easily—at first. Then Tubbs began*

# OF THE WEST ★ ★ ★

By

BRUCE CASSIDAY

*using psychology. He started a whispering campaign.*

*Alice thought little of it at first. But she began losing all her customers and wondered why. Then one night she overheard a man at the bar saying, "Who wants to take money from a woman?"*

*Alice, her anger aroused, took her place at her table that night with her chilly eyes the color of a clear winter sky. She flipped the cards from the faro box angrily, glaring at Tubbs with each draw. Tubbs nonchalantly continued his game, pretending not to notice.*

*Suddenly there was a shout, and a chair crashed to the floor. Alice turned and saw a miner crawling over the table toward Tubbs, a knife in his hand. The man was yelling drunkenly, "You cheated me, damn your hide!"*

*With the ease of a practiced gunman, Alice drew out her .45 and shot the man in the arm. Screaming and bleeding, the miner slid off the upended table and collapsed in a heap. Tubbs, his face white, turned and saw Alice standing there with the smoking .45 in her hand. He looked at her, and she looked at him.*

*"Damned if I know why I shot him," said Alice innocently. But Tubbs could see why, for he read it in her eye. In front of that mob of amazed camp-town citizens, Tubbs took Alice in his arms and kissed her full on the lips.*

*They were married shortly after, and they gave up gambling. They found a little homestead forty-eight miles west of Sturgis, and there they settled happily among the chickens and cows, and the peaceful quiet of the countryside.*

# NO HOME FOR A GYPSY HEART

By KENNETH FOWLER

DONNA DELANEY wondered how she would tell him. How *did* you tell a man that you were through with him, especially when you knew that telling him would only add to the load of misery in your heart?

She shivered as a cool night breeze pierced the ragged blanket wrapped around her shoulders and trickled through to the flimsy ballerina costume she wore beneath it. Her blue eyes were somber as she stood beside the big Osnaburg-tilted Murphy wagon that was the headquarters of Vanroy's Traveling Medicine Show. She was watching Vic Vanroy, the owner, helping old Pop Gruber, his fiddler and handyman, erect the tent in which they bunked together after each night's show.

Pulling the blanket tighter around her spangled bodice, she simultaneously saw Vic peel off his buckskin jacket. Then, clad only in jeans and an undershirt, he picked up a heavy sledge from beside the tent.

The muscles in Vic's arms rippled and flexed as he swung the sledge, striking the peg with a *whump!* that in one blow drove it to the proper six-inch depth in the ground. Donna sighed, fascinated by this performance as she had always been. And then, as she studied his strong, square-chinned face in the moonlight, a swooping sensation of loneliness engulfed her.

**Was Donna doomed always to queen it over honkatonk hombres, when what she really wanted was to make one rancher her king?**

Tall and rangily built, Vic Vanroy had a grace and flexibility of movement rare in a man who stood six-feet-four in his sock feet, and a face that might be called arresting, rather than handsome. Somewhat square in shape, it was topped by a mop of unruly blond hair, almost sliky in texture, under which a long straight nose and cool gray eyes gave a relieving aspect to a mouth perhaps a little too broad and sensuously full to be pleasant.

Donna was remembering, now, the warning Pop Gruber had given her, when she had first joined Vic's medicine show, a year ago. "You look out, with Vic," he had told her. "Anything he likes more'n money, it's a purty new face. Reason he keeps changin' his dancin' gals. They come and go—like Vic's hankerin' for a change of female scenery."

She had taken the grizzled old-timer's warning at face value, and at the outset had maintained a strictly impersonal relationship with the medicine show's owner. But gradually, as she had come to know Vic better and he had done nothing to disturb her trust in him, she had decided that Pop's advice had been no more than the maunderings of a silly old man. And then had come the night when Pop had driven in to town, to fetch in their week's supplies. . . .

Their camp had been at the edge of a

She was confused, tormented, as she surrendered her lips. . . .

creek, where the magic of a full moon had tinted the rushing water to a molten silver. She and Vic had been seated on a mossy old deadfall, and the cool air had been freighted with the sweetness of early spring, and there had seemed to be some kind of subtle communication between them, compounded out of the night's softness and their exhilarating nearness to each other.

A FEW minutes before, she had washed her hair in the creek, and polished by moonlight, it had looked like a sheen of glossy black velvet draped sleekly across the shoulders of her open-necked cotton blouse.

Vic had murmured, "You have beautiful hair, Donna," and her Irish-blue eyes had looked at him penetratingly for a moment; then she said:

"You've told that to quite a lot of girls, haven't you, Vic?" And then she had been faintly confused by his prompt and candid answer.

"Yes," he had said, "I have. I suppose Pop has told you something?"

"He said you were attracted to pretty new faces."

"There's a big difference between a man being attracted, and being drawn honestly into love with a girl," Vic had said.

"Oh?" she had murmured.

"Every man makes mistakes. I know I have. But this time I know it's the real thing." She had felt his grip on her hand tighten. "I'm in love, Donna. June-moon crazy in love—with you," he had said.

She had felt her breath catch. Then she had laughed. "You have spring fever. I suggest you try a bottle of old Dr. Vanroy's Elixir of Life." She looked up at him roguishly. "That's good for about everything, isn't it?"

He had bent to her, murmuring, "Everything . . . but this," and as his arm had crept around her shoulder she had felt a sharp surge of emotion and had turned her face up to him. And suddenly their mouths jarred together. . . .

The creek had hummed a lullaby and the moon had rolled out a carpet of silver at their feet, and for a long and quiveringly sweet moment they had clung together, making a single motionless silhouette in the darkness. And then his arm had drawn tighter around her, and she had had to suppress a sudden wild urge to hold it and press it harder against her.

With a guilty start, she had drawn back from him.

He had given her a faintly irritated look. "What's the matter? Pop went to town, didn't he?"

"I—I think I'd better get back to the wagon, Vic."

"Why? We're going to be married, aren't we?"

"Are we? I didn't know that you'd even asked me."

"Then I'm asking you now, Sugar! We'll do it next week. The first town where we can fetch up with a sky pilot."

Donna's face had shown a sober thoughtfulness, as she looked up at him. Then she had shaken her head.

"We'll see, Vic," she had told him noncommittally. "This is something I have to feel sure about. Very sure."

And there the matter had rested for a month. A month in which she had had to steel herself constantly against all Vic's urgings and importunities. And then, when she had almost convinced herself that he was honestly in love with her, and would remain constant, lightning had struck.

The show had reached a little settlement called Traveler's Rest, and she had gone into town, alone, to find a store where she could buy a few notions and pretties for herself. And there, on Main Street, she had seen Vic parading jauntily along the boardwalk with a painted dance hall flossy hanging amorously upon his arm.

Donna had gone back to the wagon and cried out her heart in utter misery.

That had been three days ago. And for three days she had shown no change in her attitude toward Vic, except for a frozen outward calm. And Vic, perhaps having only a small suspicion that she might have seen him in town, acted as if nothing whatever had happened to warrant any change in her.

And now they were on the fringes of this new town, Partner's Wells, a well-settled place with two hotels, and, Pop Gruber had told her, a reasonably tamed-down reputation, for a frontier settlement. "Mebbe you could pick up a job at one of the hotels," Pop had suggested, guessing her dilemma. "Ought to be plenty opportunities for decent, respectable work in a burg like this."

*Decent, respectable work.* Donna stared out across the littered camp ground and shivered at its bleakness under a cold moon. Decency and respectability were something she had always yearned for, and yet here she was, wriggling and pirouetting night after night before a bunch of ogling males, while Pop's fiddle screeched and the garish coal oil flares aimed their pitiless light upon her bare shoulders and scantly sheathed bodice. Men thought of show girls as shameless whether they were or not.

Her own mother had been a dance hall girl, her father a fiddle-footed prospector who had been killed in a mining camp brawl. And orphaned at fifteen, she had become a drudge in a frontier road ranch, and later a singer in a trail town dance hall. And there Vic Vanroy had found her, and offered her a job with his show. She had accepted it. Traveling, she had thought, might eventually offer her opportunities for a more reputable job. Or—who could tell? —a chance, some day, to find a husband and fulfill yearnings, at the core of her heart.

STANDING beside the big Murphy wagon in which she slept each night, Donna now felt herself torn by conflicting emotions, watching Vic put the finishing touches on the raising of the tent. Was there a weak and wavering spark of hope in her that she might still change Vic, and make him over into the kind of man she had always dreamed of having, some day, as a husband?

Suddenly she was aware that Vic had seen her, and as he swung around and started toward the wagon, she made her decision. It's no use, she thought despairingly. Tell him now, and get it over with.

Vic greeted her off-handedly, coming up to the wagon.

"Good show tonight. We did a land office business."

"Did we?" she said coldly.

He stared at her. "Say, what's been eating you lately? You've been—"

"I've been thinking, Vic. I've been doing a lot of thinking. And I'm leaving the show tomorrow."

"Leaving the show! But you can't do that, Donna! Where would I ever find anyone to—"

"To take my place here?" she interrupted him. "Maybe you could look around in Traveler's Rest, Vic."

She saw him start. Then his face masked, and his mouth turned down in a grimly amused look.

"So you saw me with that girl in Partner's Wells," he said.

"I did."

"And you thought—" Suddenly he threw back his head and laughed. "Excuse me, Donna," he said at last, "but I couldn't help that. And don't think I'm flattered. I'm just amused."

"Are you, Vic? I'm not."

"Listen, Donna—that woman you saw me with used to work for my dad, when he ran this show. She's forty years old, if she's a day!"

"She didn't look forty to me."

"Well, with her war paint on, she might pass for thirty. Anyway, it's a simple enough story. She was on her uppers—

gave me a hard luck story about needing ten dollars for stage fare to the next town. What could I do? I blew her to a square meal, and gave her the ten."

"I wish I could believe that, Vic. But I don't."

"But it's the truth, I tell you! Good Lord, Donna, you don't think I'd—"

Donna said, "Good night, Vic," and wheeling, stepped to the wagon and climbed up to its seat.

At that moment, she heard Pop call out to Vic and saw him jerk around angrily. Then, irresolutely, Vic was looking back at her.

"You'll think better of this," he said, "after a good night's sleep."

"Do you think so, Vic?" Donna parted the wagon flaps and stepped inside. Then, exhaustedly, she sank down on her bunk. And finally, after what seemed an eternity of restless tossing and turning, she cried herself into a fitful slumber. . . .

* * *

In Partner's Wells, Donna found a cheap boarding house run by a woman named Mrs. Skelly, and after establishing herself there, the following morning, she set out immediately on her job hunt. But by noon, after canvassing the entire easterly side of Main Street, she had found no job. She had offered her services at the Partner's Hotel, Llewellyn's Lunch Room, the Eagle Mercantile, and a little hole-in-the-wall notions shop, the Whatnot, among others. And of all the places she had visited, only one, very briefly, had seemed to offer a ray of hope.

At the hotel, the owner, Mr. Standlee, had said he needed a waitress, and had asked her about her last place of employment. But when she had told him about the medicine show, he had frowned and shaken his head. "Sorry," he had told her, suddenly curt. "Afraid you wouldn't do," and he had walked away from her in blunt dismissal.

Now, as she crossed tiredly to the opposite side of the street, Donna abruptly had a thought. Her cheeks! She had rouged them this morning, before starting her walk, out of sheer habit. And she remembered now. Decent women didn't paint. No wonder she had been so coldly rebuffed, at so many different places!

Donna heard gurgling sounds, and glancing up, saw water gushing from a pipe into a big iron trough. Then she saw the sign over a wide doorway: CLIFF JOHNSTON'S LIVERY. Seeing no one near, she dipped her handkerchief into the trough and vigorously scrubbed her face till it was free of all traces of paint. The water in the tank was clear as crystal, and she studied her reflection in it.

The water reflected a face that was a little wide and high-boned at the upper cheek line, a pertly snubbed nose, and eyes as blue and deep as a Killarney lake. But now the face looked starkly white, its pores open and a little too noticeable from too many applications of cheap rouge.

A voice from behind her said dryly, "Handy place for a wash," and whipping around she saw Vic Vanroy. His smoky eyes had a faintly grim look, staring down at her.

"Vic!" she cried. "What—what are you doing here?"

"I live here," Vic said. He grinned. "Don't you remember me—Vic Vanroy, ex-owner of Vanroy's Traveling Medicine Show?"

"Ex-owner!"

"I've sold out the show, Donna—lock, stock and barrel. And bought The Gem—a block upstreet. A place where a man can scour the dust from his throat—but no wheels, and no girls."

Donna's voice tightened bitterly. "You will change that."

"No," Vic said, and Donna steeled herself against the look of sober earnestness in his eyes. "All I'm interested in changing, Donna, is the way you feel about me."

"I'm sorry, Vic. But it's too late for that."

"It's never too late. I'm planning to become a solid citizen of this town, Donna. And a solid citizen needs a wife."

"Then I wish you luck in finding one."

"You know the girl I have in mind for the job, Donna."

"I'm sorry. But I have another kind of job in mind right now."

"And a mighty thin chance of finding it," said Vic. "I saw you coming out of the Partners', awhile back. And later out of the notions store." Vic's face turned rocky and he said with ugly vehemence, "Damn all the smug, high-chinned people in this saintly burg!"

Donna tucked the soggy handkerchief into her reticule and snapped the lid shut.

"I've got to go now, Vic."

"As long as you're not leaving town," said Vic, "I'm going to keep asking you, Donna. I'm going to keep asking till you say yes."

"I'm afraid you will have a long wait, Vic," she said, and turning, she walked away from him, up the street.

AN HOUR later her tour of the shops and mercantiles on the westerly side of the street without result, Donna continued on out of town until she came to a small plank bridge spanning a creek. A motte of cottonwoods offered a cool umbrella of shade where the creek's high banks widened to form a deep pool, and as she walked out onto the bridge, she felt herself trembling with fatigue.

Presently, conscious of a sinking despair within her, she leaned against the span's thin pole rail and stared down moodily at the clear pebbled bottom of the pool. Had she made a mistake with Vic? She wondered now. Should she have given him one more chance? And, if she did, wouldn't it blot out, once and for all, this feeling of sad and lonely misery that lay, like a stone, at the bottom of her heart?

She heard the stomp of a horse's hoof on the opposite end of the bridge, and as she spun around, her back struck against the flimsy rail and it gave way. She screamed, and in the next moment had hit the water with a great spanking splash.

She had a terrifying awareness of blackness shot through with greedily sucking bubbles. Then as she rose to the surface, gasping, she heard another splash, and as she started to sink again saw a pair of long, rhythmically sweeping arms churning the water toward her. She felt a hand swoop under her waist. And then, after a nightmarish eternity of seconds, she was lying on a bed of fern and sweet-grass at the lip of the bank, and a pair of blue eyes were looking down at her.

A drawling voice said, "You got a mite damp, but you're more winded than hurt. Take a couple deep breaths and you'll be all right."

She did, and began to feel better. Then she pulled herself up to a sitting position, and stared down ruefully at her soggy skirt and blouse.

"It was my fault. Reckon my horse must have spooked you," the stranger said.

She looked up, then, and was aware of a smooth, dark-complexioned face that ran, not unattractively, toward a slightly gaunt lengthiness.

"No," Donna said. "It was my fault. It was really very stupid of me to jump like that."

"I'm Elkton Edwards," her rescuer volunteered. "But I don't guess I need any introduction to you. Saw you the other night—at the medicine show."

Donna stood, and shivering, plucked embarrassedly at her blouse, where it adhered soggily to the curved rim of her bodice.

"My name is Donna Delaney," she said. "But I'm not with the show any more. I quit last night."

"I see," murmured Elkton Edwards. "Well, I think the first order of business is to get you home and into some dry clothes."

He assisted her up the bank, then, leading her to his horse, helped her to mount, insisting that she ride.

Ten minutes later they were at Mrs. Skelly's.

MRS. SKELLY was out, and after changing her clothes, Donna went down to the kitchen and brewed a pot of tea. Elkton Edwards was waiting for her in the parlor as she brought in a tray, holding two steaming cups.

"I'm glad you agreed to wait." She smiled at him. "But I really think you should have gone home and changed."

"I had a reason for staying," Elkton Edwards told her. "In fact, two reasons."

"Oh! Yes?"

"The first is, if you're interested in finding work here in town, I run the Elkhorn Dance Hall. And one of our dancers quit last week. The job's yours, if you'd like it."

"I appreciate your offer, Mr. Edwards, but I've been looking for something—well, different."

"H'm-m. Can't say I blame you. As a matter of fact, my interest in the Elkhorn was mainly financial, until my partner died, four months ago." He sipped from the cup of tea Donna had handed him, adding, "To be frank, I intend to sell the place as soon as I can. I like to raise horses, and there's a nice little spread a couple miles out of town that I've had my eye on."

Donna said politely, "I see," and waited.

Elk Edwards finished his tea and walked across to a taboret, putting down his cup. Then, as he turned, Donna was conscious of him looking at her in a shy, half-quizzical way.

"The other reason for my lingering," he said, "is that I feel personally responsible for that unwanted bath you had to take this afternoon. So, if you'd let me, I'd like to make amends by taking you out to dinner tonight."

"D-dinner! Tonight?" Donna suddenly realized that she was babbling and blushing. "But—but we hardly know each other, Mr. Edwards!"

"Call me Elk. Everyone else in town does."

"Well—Elk, then. But I still think—"

"That I should have beaten around the bush a little more?" suggested Elk Edwards whimsically.

"You are certainly not a man to beat around bushes, Mr.—Elk."

"That's wrong?"

"Why—why, no! But—"

"Then suppose I pick you up around six-thirty."

His direct, matter-of-fact way struck a responsive chord in Donna. And suddenly she found herself looking up into his gravely searching eyes, and laughing.

"There!" she said at last. "Now I feel better. I haven't laughed like that in ages."

"Then the ayes have it?" he asked.

"If that's the only way I can get you to go home and change your clothes—yes!" Donna said.

She felt buoyant and eager, as she went up the stairs to her room after he had gone, but after the first warming sense of exhilaration had worn off, she begin to have doubts and misgivings.

She threw herself down on her bed and stared up at the ceiling. Suppose she did take a job at the Elkhorn? Maybe chorus work wouldn't be so bad, if she were working for a man like Elk. And after all the rebuffs and turned-up noses she had encountered in town this morning, did she have any choice, really?

* * *

It was her fifth night with Elk Edwards' show, and as she sat at her backstage dressing table at the Elkhorn, waiting for her curtain call, she thought gloomily, Here I am, back in the same old rut. She looked distastefully at the reflection of her lacquered cheeks in the tall wall mirror hung in front of her.

Her face made her think of the face of a painted wooden doll. A face stiff as a board—and artificial as a mask. But in another fifteen minutes, when she came pirouetting out from the wings, to face an audience of ogling, boot-stomping men, there would be nothing stiff about her lithe, expressive body. For a few short minutes, the emptiness in her heart would be forgotten, and she would be like a wind-blown feather dancing on the breeze. But afterward, always, afterward, she would be thinking of Vic, whom she had neither seen nor heard from now in five whole days.

Donna stared frozenly at herself in the mirror. Surely, by now, he must know of her working here. And he must have heard, too, of Elk Edwards' increasing attentiveness toward her.

Thought of Elk stirred an odd tenderness in her. Elk was older than Vic—perhaps thirty—and she still could not define her feeling toward him. Perhaps it was simply a warm gratefulness, a feeling that she could always be at ease with him. Whereas with Vic she had always felt a sense of urgency, a pent-up desire to have her emotions released quickly. Quickly, and, perhaps, blindly. . . .

Now, listening to the tinny rataplan of the piano out front, and the shuffling of the chorus going through its first paces of the night, Donna thought of Rosita Montez. After Elk had seen Donna rehearse just once, and then promptly had given Donna the second most important solo number in the show, Rosita, heretofore the queen bee at the Elkhorn, had been furious. Rosita had gone to Elk in a jealous rage and demanded that Donna be put in the chorus.

Elk had refused. But Rosita herself had not quit the show, as she had threatened to do. And Donna thought she knew the reason. She had seen the boldly obvious way in which the sultry little Mexican made eyes at Elk, and it had strangely disturbed her.

"Is there some dark gypsy strain of fickleness in me?" she kept asking herself, "that I can never make up my own mind or heart? Am I in love with both Elk and Vic?"

A tap on the door roused her, and she jerked in her chair.

"Yes?" she called. "Who's there?"

"It's Elk, Donna. All right to come in?"

"Yes. Yes, of course."

Elk Edwards stepped into the room, looking calm, unruffled, as he always did. "You're on in ten minutes," he said. "Everything all right?"

"Of course. What makes you think it isn't?"

Elk Edwards sighed, sinking his lean frame into a straight-backed chair. "You don't like this kind of work, Donna, and now you are rebelling against me."

Then he asked bluntly, "Is there a man in your life, Donna?"

She started. "Why, Elk! What makes you ask that?"

"Because I am in love," he replied gravely. "I thought I was wearing my heart on my sleeve, but I realize now that you haven't even noticed it there."

"Oh, I don't know! I—I just don't know!" she cried in a choked voice.

Elk stood, the smell of cigar smoke lingering about him as he laid his slow, penetrating glance on her. "I didn't mean to get you upset—especially just before show time," he murmured apologetically. "All I ask for is an even break, Donna—and I hope you didn't mind my laying my cards on the table."

Donna said warmly, "Of course I didn't, Elk! It's just that—well, there has been someone. And I—well, I can't be sure about it—him—till I have waited this thing out with myself."

Elk seemed abstracted, now, looking at her and murmuring, "I've had a couple buyers nibbling, for the Elkhorn. But a little complication has arisen on the other matter—you know, the ranch."

"I—I hope the deal doesn't fall through for you."

He grinned. "I'm not a gambler, but I do play my hunches. Chimney's a good spread, and I may get it yet. But if I don't, there are always other places to be had." He walked to the door, then halted, looking back. "Our usual at the hotel after the show, Donna—coffee and cakes?"

"Our usual, Elk."

"See you later, then," he said, and went out.

Donna glanced at the little ormolu clock on her dressing table. Still ten minutes to go, and for some reason she felt nervous and impatient tonight—wanting to go out there right now, and get it over with. Faintly, through the transom above the door of her room, she could hear Rosita Montez's huskily throaty contralto, singing, *Just a Bird in a Gilded Cage.* That's what Rosita was, and probably would always be. And it was what she, Donna Delaney, would become, unless—

She felt a sudden odd quickening within her, thinking of Elk. She knew now that he would have proposed tonight if she had been less frank with him than he had been with her. He was so different from Vic. Some deep intuitive femaleness in her told her that Elk would be right for her, steadily and dependably right, while Vic would always be a question mark. But emotions and judgment clashed and warred easily, in a woman's heart, and Vic had the power to melt her so easily. If only—

A voice from her doorway said, "Hi!" and she jerked around with a little gasp.

"Vic!" she cried. "How—how did you get in here?"

He grinned. "Walked. There's always a back door to these places."

"Vic, I am not dressed for receiving callers. I think you had better leave."

He crossed the room to her. "Now tell me to leave," he said, pulling her against him.

Trembling, she wrenched back from him.

"Vic, get out of here! I've warned you!"

"I'd do that little thing, sweetheart," Vic said, "if I thought you really wanted it."

"I—I do!"

"No, you don't baby. What you want is to hear the news I've got for you. All about Vic Vanroy, Solid Citizen." He paused and grinned. Then, in a low, urgent voice, he went on, "Donna, I've taken an option on a ranch. For us, baby. A cosy little spread a couple miles out of town where Mr. and Mrs. Vic Vanroy are going to live happily ever after!"

"I—I don't believe it."

"Then ask Mal Hemstreet. He's the broker in the deal. Place called Chimney. And wait till you see it!"

Donna tensed. "Chimney!"

"You know the place?"

"No, no. . . ." Donna caught her breath. "But I—I've heard about it." She felt Vic's eyes hungering over her face, her long legs in their clocked black silk stockings. And a kind of responsive tenseness rippled through her as he reached out and pulled her head gently against his shoulder. An inner voice cried out to her, "Don't, don't!" but as his arms tightened around her, she felt resistance crumpling. His voice was low, compelling whispering, "Donna . . . Sweetheart! I'm taking this place for you—for us! I'll sell the Gem. And after that . . ."

She was confused and tormented and ineffably weary, as she surrendered her lips to his kiss.

She did not hear the soft knock on her door, and was unaware of another presence in the doorway of the room until a voice struck at her with the flatness of a hammer blow.

"You're on in two minutes, Donna—if the gentleman can restrain his ardor till after the show."

She wrenched her mouth from Vic's with a startled gasp. And then, her eyes flicking abruptly to the doorway, a sick

dismay held her rigid as she saw Elk Edwards standing there. His face was frozen in the look of a man who has just been back-stabbed. . . .

VIC VANROY halted the buckboard at the crest of the ridge, and nudging Donna out of her preoccupation, pointed downward across a grama-carpeted valley. A white adobe ranch house stood on a pine-clad slope of the valley, pinked by the last rosy hues of sunset.

"There's Chimney," Vic said. "What do you think of that for a cosy little love-nest?"

Donna's gaze followed his pointing finger. She nodded listlessly. "It's pretty, Vic."

Vic swung around on the buggy seat, staring down at her. "Say, what's the matter with you, anyway?" he demanded. "You've hardly spoken a word all the way out here."

Donna shook her head. "I—I guess I'm just tired, Vic."

His eyes took on a cold expression, studying over her haggardly pale face. "You should have put on a little color," he grumbled. "This is supposed to be fun, not a funeral."

"It's chilly up here in the hills, Vic. Let's hurry. It will be getting dark soon."

"If you're still in a tizzy about last night, forget it," he growled. Then he grinned. "And if you're thinking about Edwards," he said, "he'll get along. That Rosita Montez is quite a dish. And Elk ought to know, from all I can hear in town."

Donna stiffened. Then she relaxed back on the buckboard seat, saying, "Maybe you heard it wrong, Vic."

"Maybe." He picked up the reins and spanked them against the rump of the roan hitched to the traces. "But if you want to know how I get it, they're as thick as two peas in the same pod."

Donna relapsed into silence as Vic tooled the buckboard back into the trail winding downward to the valley floor. Her reconciliation with him was not what she had expected it to be, somehow. But the die was cast, now. For better or for worse. And it had all stemmed from a single impulsive moment, last night, when she had let him kiss her, had let him back, forgivingly and completely, into her heart.

Completely? Was she sure of that, even now? Evidently Vic's eyes had already strayed toward Rosita Montez. Maybe he was incorrigible. And maybe she was a fool. Maybe it was mere foolish pride, a desire to see him brought to his knees before her, humbled and contrite, that had swayed her last night and weakened her defenses against him. Or was it—love? Was this sensation of sick, sad loneliness gnawing inside her a symptom of her feeling for Vic—or for Elk Edwards?

There had been no cosy chit-chat corner in the hotel dining room for her and Elk last night. Immediately after she had finished her dance number, she had dressed and rushed off to her boarding house, Elk making no effort whatever to see her. She had half hoped that he would, so that she could explain to him. But afterward she had thought, Explain how? How can you explain something to someone else, when you cannot explain it to yourself?

All the next morning she had remained in her room, but at noon she had come down to the kitchen, telling Mrs. Skelly that she felt ill and wanted only a slice of toast and a cup of tea. These she had had alone, in her room, and had not come down again until six o'clock, when Vic had called, with the buckboard, to take her out to look over the house.

Chimney . . . The irony of the situation struck her with full force, now, as Vic tooled the buckboard around a bend in the trail. The ranch house came into closer view, snuggled on the flank of a rocky hillside with a stand of tall, conically-shaped pines making a lofty backdrop behind it. A lovely place, with a single wide

adobe chimney flashed with a great iron "C" in its exact center. A hundred yards below it, a creek wound between clumps of alder, its crystal water touched to rose, now, under one last gush of light from the sinking sun.

Vic was offering her this. A home. A place to sink roots. The thing about which she had always dreamed, but which had seemed so remote from reality. The cooler mountain air, here, nibbled through her light coat, and she shivered. And then she thought of Elk. It seemed an ironical coincidence that Elk and Vic had both picked out this place, with the same girl in mind. Had Elk known it was Vic who had picked up an option on it?

The buckboard rattled over a little plank bridge spanning the creek, and slowed as it started slowly up the rutted grade toward the ranch yard. A few minutes later it stood halted before a wide front gallery, and Vic was handing Donna down from the seat, saying, "Well, do I carry you over the doorstep?"

Donna's voice sounded oddly strained, answering him. "You do not," she said firmly. "There would have to be another little matter attended to before you could do that, Vic."

He grinned, thrusting a key into the front door and swinging it open. "Wait till you see inside," he told her, "and you'll stop being such a fuss-budget."

His words filled her with a queer sense of foreboding. Then she stepped into the big, square-shaped living room of the house and uttered a little gasp. Whoever had owned the place previously had left it completely furnished for the next owner. Two large easy chairs were drawn up before a huge fieldstone fireplace, and opposite the blackened hearth there was a single comfortable-looking sofa-bed, covered with a gay-colored Navajo blanket. The great ceiling beams were of solid oak, and time-weathered to a rich smoky luster.

Donna cried, "It's beautiful!"

VIC WAS shrugging out of his duck jacket and hanging it on an elkhorn coat rack beside the fireplace. "Make yourself at home," he said with a casual wave of his arm. "Look around and enjoy yourself."

Excited in spite of herself, Donna peered into two medium-sized bedrooms off the living room, then into a large roomy kitchen beyond. Returning to the living room, she sank down on the sofa and Vic crossed the room and seated himself beside her.

"Please, Vic. We ought to be getting back. It will be full dark in another hour."

"Shucks! We've got lamps here."

He put his arms around her, and for an instant, the old eagerness for him ran hot in her blood. Then, as his mouth found hers in a stormy and sudden kiss, the moment of tumultuous compulsion in her was gone. Then, out of a sudden tide of fear and anger, the thought washed upon her, *Elk would not do this to me,* and with panicky strength she tried to wrest away from Vic's hold.

She found that it was like trying to squirm out of an inexorably clamped vise. He plucked his mouth from hers long enough to say, "You damned little witch! You're wanting this as much as I am!" and then a frightening dizziness was swimming before her eyes, and his mouth clamped down on hers again. The dizziness seemed to melt into a sparkly blackness, after that, and she felt herself sinking backward.

At this moment she had a vague consciousness of voices, and was aware of the pressure of his arms abruptly slackening. She raised herself from the sofa, fumbling at the torn lace of her bodice. And then, with shocked disbelief, she saw Elk Edwards standing just inside the doorway. And beside him, her pointed face bone-white around its garish rouge spots, was Rosita Montez!

Vic Vanroy was up on his feet now, his eyes fixed on the small blue derringer

gripped in Elk Edwards' right hand. Then he saw Rosita, and his face became convulsed.

"Get out!" he cried in a gagged voice. "Get out before I—"

Elk Edwards said calmly, "You seem to be a little mixed up, Vanroy. You're the one who's getting out." Then he looked at Donna. "Donna, are you all right? I want the truth."

"I—I am all right, Elk. But how—"

"I went to Mrs. Skelly's, looking for you," Elk interrupted her tersely. "Then I went to see Mal Hemstreet. Finally—his mouth tightened now, as his glance switched coldly to Rosita Montez's face—"I had a little chat with Rosita here."

Donna looked at the dance hall girl, in her figure-moulding dress and flashy red slippers. Then she looked into Vic Vanroy's smoldering eyes, leveled rancorously down at her.

She murmured, looking back at Elk, "But I still don't see—"

"You will," he told her. He grimly but gently explained, "Vanroy had only a two-day option on Chimney, and it expired yesterday. Since then, I have held it." He stabbed a glance at Rosita, continuing, "As for Rosita, here, I made her come along with me tonight. Go ahead, Rosita. Please tell Miss Delaney where you went last night after the show."

"I was weeth—heem!" she blurted out fiercely, pointing at Vic.

Vic's rage-filled eyes darted at Donna, and he snarled, "She's a damned greasy little liar! I never—"

"Eet ees you who are a liar!" Rosita cried. *"Bribón! Malvado!* I weel tear your eyes out! I—"

She started a catlike lunge toward him, but was abruptly pulled back by Elk Edwards.

"If there's any clawing to be done," Elk told her, "you can take care of it outside." His glance froze back on Vic Vanroy. "Take her out of here, Vanroy. Get going! And if you want to get yourself into some real trouble—just look me up!"

Donna saw a change come over Vic's face. All the strut and braggadocio seemed gone from him now. And suddenly, she saw him for what he was—a weakling.

He shot a last sullen look of defiance at

her, at Elk Edwards. Then, with a final cringing glance at the gun clamped in Elk's hand, he pivoted and strode out of the room, Rosita Montez sulkily following him.

A thunder of silence seemed to fill the room as Donna reluctantly moved her gaze to the man standing alone before her. Elk Edwards' eyes were grave, but oddly undisturbed, meeting her glance.

He still made no move to approach her, but she had the feeling of a cool clean current passing between them, vital, unchanged and unchangeable. And then his calm, even voice flowed out to her like a soft bell stroke, saying, "I have sold the Elkhorn, Donna. If you will marry me, I would like this to be our home."

She moved toward him, then, and his mouth found hers, warmly, tenderly. And then she was sobbing her happiness against the hard brace of his shoulder, and his voice was like a breath of spring against her ear, murmuring, "You are home, little gypsy." And she knew, at long last, that she was. ♥ ♥ ♥

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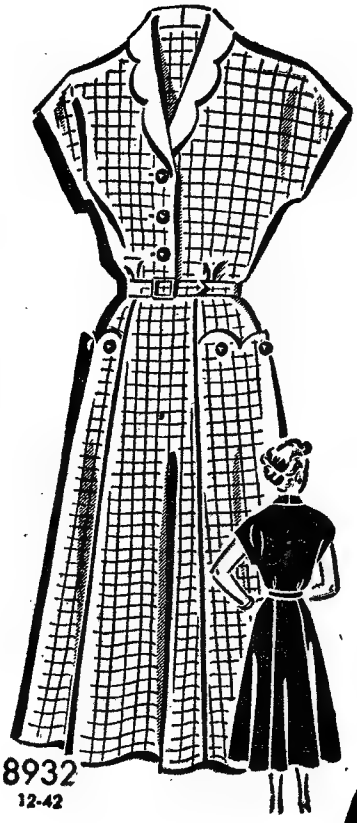


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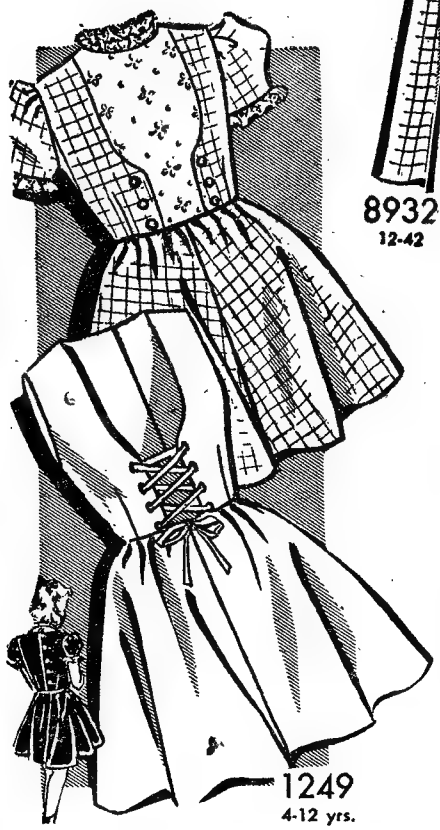


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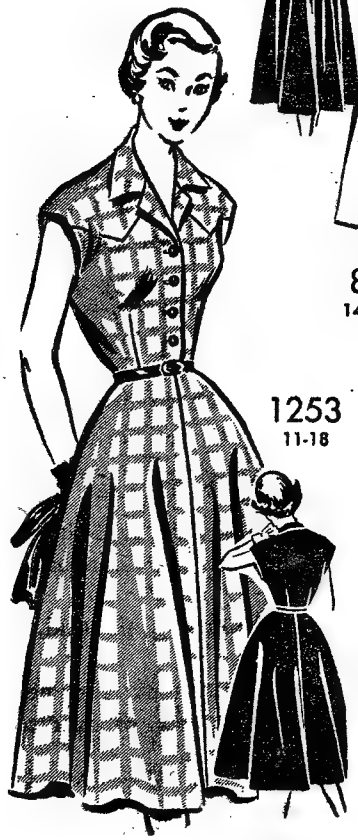


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DEE KERMIT

# REDHEAD—Handle With Care

**When her buckaroo fell for a rangeland siren's bait, Julie started cookin'—with caresses. . . .**

FROM the doorstep of their little tenant house, Julie, hunkered down with her hands clasped across her knees, stared up at her father, Big Jim Kelso, with an expression in which love, solicitude and a thinly disguised anger were oddly mingled. A jot above pan size—she stood a full five feet three when wearing her high-heeled riding boots—her full soft mouth budded worriedly into a litle *moue* as her eyes, frosty blue under braids of shimmery titian hair, made their sharp assessment of the look on her father's long, bony face.

It was a look of hurt, and almost a look of bewilderment, still only half concealed under a mask of feigned indifference. Julie, however, knew it was not indifference, but a bitter and rankling resignation. And deep within her, her heart ached for Big Jim Kelso's humiliation at the hands of what she had so often heard called "the gentler sex."

Big Jim spoke first, his voice sounding dulled and apathetic, despite his effort to make it seem casual.

"Got your dishes and kitchenware all packed, I see," he mentioned off-handedly. Then, "I saw Mark Templeton yesterday afternoon. He's sending his spring wagon over to pick up our furniture and the rest of the stuff. Sometime this forenoon, he said."

In a flat, vicious voice, Julie said, "I hate that woman!"

Chidingly, Big Jim shook his head. "Pearl Marvin's the owner of Andiron,

**Suddenly he pulled her against him, and his lips met hers. . . .**

now. She don't want me as foreman; that's her right and privilege. Anyway—" Big Jim heaved a sigh. "We got no call to complain. The M.T.-Connected's a right smart of a spread."

"It will never be the same for you there, Dad—and you know it won't!"

"Now, honey—"

"And don't start honeying me! I'm not in the mood for it." Julie instantly regretted her flare of temper, as she always did, after it was too late to stem the explosion. I'm sorry, Dad," she said contritely, "but I just can't stand it to see you eat humble pie this way. And all on account of that—that black-haired hussy of a swivel dude!"

Jim Kelso shook his head again, sighing, "Things change, Julie. That's life," he said philosophically. He stooped and kissed her on top of the head, adding, "I've got to mosey on down to the barn and pack some of my work gear. If Mark sends Pete Hoskins over with the spring wagon, you can show him where all the stuff is."

Julie stood up abruptly, looking boyishly hoydenish in a pair of skin-tight levis and a mannish gray cotton blouse. "Dad, wait!" she said. "What about Ken Carpenter? You don't think he'd be fool enough to—"

"Take on the job I've just been bounced from?" Jim Kelso finished for her grimly. He swung around, his smoky eyes acute and a little meager, searching over her cleanly planed face, which peculiarly semed to take on a sharper and more vivid prettiness when she was angry. He frowned, saying, "You let Ken plow his own furrow. No need of a man's cutting off his nose to spite his face."

"I don't care," snapped Julie, "what Ken Carpenter does! But I hate to see any man made a fool of by a lot of fancy fluff-duffs and a little female war paint!"

"Depending," said Jim Kelso gently, "on who wears 'em." He grinned down at her deprecatingly, adding, "It's all right when you do, I suppose."

Julie began vehemently, "Dad, you know darned well I never—"

But Jim Kelso didn't let her finish. He swung, saying cryptically, "Time you started, mebbe", and then was walking at his long-gaited stride up toward the barn, his gray eyes intent and preoccupied, as they had been, now, for more than a week.

Ever since that Marvin female arrived here, thought Julie darkly, ever since she started throwing her weight around.

But what had her father meant, saying, "Time you started, mebbe"? Surely he didn't think—he couldn't have meant—

She cut the idea curtly from her mind, neatly and cleanly, as she might snip at the exasperating end of a thread. That was ridiculous! Pearl Marvin was twenty-five or six if she was a day, and looked it. Not, of course, that she wasn't—well, attractive. Tall, slim and dark, she did have a kind of sultry beauty that might put notions in some men's heads. But not in Ken Carpenter's. Nor, for that matter, in the head of any man who carried an ounce of brains around with him. Anybody with half an eye could see that she was the bossy type, and once that kind dabbed their loop on a man. . . .

Absently, Julie Kelso drew her hand across the tight titian-red braids coiled above the tips of her ears. Braids were quick and easy to make, so that's how she always did up her hair. But maybe they did look a little—well, severe. Dowdy—that was the word. Maybe if she wore it swept straight back, the way Pearl Marvin did, and gathered it up into a bobbly little *chignon* at the nape of her neck. . . .

Psha! Fiddlesticks and nonsense! Her red mouth set in a small pout. And now, like a barn swallow swooping toward its homing point, her mind made pleasant little dips and swirls, coming to rest, finally, on the remembrance of her meeting yesterday with Ken, up in the democrat pasture. He had been out hunting a sick dogie, but hadn't found it, and when she had come up-

on him unexpectedly he was down from his horse and giving it a drink from the little pool where Bent Bow Creek had been damned up to create a tiny oasis of shade and coolness under the umbrella of a great low-branched cottonwood.

"Hi!" Ken had said. And "Hi!" she had given it back to him. And from this, one word had led to another, and one arm —Ken's—had led to her shoulder, when she had seated herself beside him on the old mossy deadfall beside the dam.

It was a lovely spot—a spot to which she came often, alone, just to relax and dream. And the dappled light of sun on the pool, the freckles of light reflected from the cottonwood upon the lazy curving water, had filled her with a kind of deep and languid peacefulness, so that it seemed as natural as the gently flowing water when Ken had suddenly pulled her against him and kissed her on the lips.

The same fierce need had seemed to fill them both, simultaneously, and the sound of the water had faded to a secret murmuring as their mouths came together. And for one of those small eternities in which the mind shuts itself completely to any sense of time, they sat locked in each other's arms, and, to Julie, even their hearts had seemed to pound in unison.

Finally, she was compelled to draw back from him out of sheer breathlessness. She had on levis and an old scuffed-out pair of Justins and a green cotton shirt shrunk from too many washings, and suddenly she realized that a top button had popped, revealing a hint of rounded whiteness below her neck line. Flushing, she pulled the shirt's folds together, saying, "Sudden Ken, they call him," and then in spite of the forced lightness in her voice, was aware of an abrupt fluttery sensation in the pit of her stomach.

Ken was looking down at her with a sober fixity, his gray-cool eyes filled with a kind of abstracted wonderment aimed at the faint spray of freckles speckling the bridge of her slim, pertly uptilted nose. "I've been wanting to do that a long time," he breathed out finally.

"Have you, Ken?" she asked softly. "Why?"

The directness of the question seemed to disconcert him momentarily, and now the subdued note of teasing in his voice seemed an effort to him. "I've got reasons," he answered. "You don't have to know everything, do you?"

"Name one," she said.

Shafts of sunlight spearing down through the interstices of the cottonwood's branches gave a chinquapin luster to her reddish-bronze hair, and she was aware of Ken Carpenter staring at it.

"One is," he said awkwardly, "you've got curly red hair, and I'm sort of partial to red curls."

"Psha!" She turned her head, and absently stroked a hand across a dark coil of braid banding her head. "How do you know I have curls?" she said. "My hair's in braids."

"Then it shouldn't be," said Ken. "Wear it loose and you'd see."

"Fiddlesticks! Anyway, what's a hank or two of hair?"

With clumsy abruptness, Ken Carpenter turned the conversation to another channel.

"I hear the old Texler homestead's on the market," he mentioned. "Sam Texler's moved to town. He's asking fifteen hundred for it."

"That's a switch," said Julie, trying to pull lightness into her voice. "Men! From red hair to homesteads in the flicker of an eye!"

Ken flushed. "They could be connected." He stood, grinning now. Then his gray eyes became thoughtfully vacant. "I've got some chores yet," he told her. "Ridin' back with me?"

Julie pouted at him. "Chores! Just when you get my woman's curiosity aroused."

Ken walked to his grulla, standing hipshot a few feet away. "Curiosity'll keep, chores won't," he said. "Comin'?"

She felt confused and let down, and just the faintest bit angered, saying, "No. I think I'll rest awhile. Maybe if I sit here long enough," she added spitefully, "I'll get to know how to do my hair so it won't look like links in a rusty chain!"

Ken Carpenter swung up to the saddle. "A copper chain," he said appreciatively, staring down at her. Then, awkwardly, he had told her, "Well, if you're not coming, I've got to slope." And he had clucked to the grulla and pointed it back toward Andiron.

She had waited until he had passed from sight beyond a distant ridge. Then, a vague anger still stirring within her, she had mounted her own horse and headed it around. But as she rode thoughtfully back toward the ranch, the anger in her had slowly dissolved into a feeling of dull, bitter-sweet painfulness. And slowly, like a warm and gentle hand pressing against her heart, she had felt the pain grow and swell into a kind of aching loneliness, and like the sudden winging of a startled bird the thought had pierced her, *Why, I am in love!*

NOW, hunkered on the doorstep of the little house which had been the only home she could remember since the day she had baked her first mudpie and cuddled her sawdust doll to her child's heart, her thoughts idled backward, turning a little somber at the memory of her motherless childhood.

She could not remember her mother, who had died when she was only two years old. But except for this vacant spot in her life—a big one, she had increasingly realized as she had grown older—her days at Andiron had been mostly happy ones. Big Jim Kelso had been—was—a wonderful father, but like most wonderful fathers had undoubtedly spoiled her a bit.

He had taught her to ride when she was only eleven, and by the time she had reached fourteen she was a little demon in the saddle, and could dab her loop on a running dogie with as much skill and aplomb, almost, as Big Jim himself. Long Tom Swiggart, Andiron's owner until his sudden tragic death, two months before, at the hands of an enraged Brahma bull, had called her, with avuncular affection, Little Miss Jinglespurs, and to her he had always been Uncle Tom. He, too, had spoiled her, and his sudden passing had left the same void in her heart that it had left in her father's.

But now things were different—so different that she no longer cared much where she went, as long as it was well out of sight of Pearl Marvin, the new owner of Andiron. At the death of Long Tom Swiggart, Pearl Marvin, his niece, and only living kin, had been summoned to Andiron by a telegram from Jason Hawks, Adobe Falls' lawyer, and executor of Tom Swiggart's estate. And upon her arrival she had been informed that she was now full owner of Andiron Ranch.

Soon afterward, apparently soured by a bequest of five thousand dollars, in Tom Swiggart's will, to Big Jim Kelso, she had announced her intention of injecting new blood into the ranch organization, and had given Big Jim a month's notice. A month's notice—Pearl Marvin's idea of a fair exchange for more than twenty years of loyal and faithful service. New blood, indeed! The new mistress of Andiron had kept on old Von Yeager, the grub-wrangler, and Mrs. Forrester, the housekeeper—sixty-five, if she was a day.

I'm the one she wanted out of her way, Julie thought bleakly, and looking up at that moment she saw Ken Carpenter heading up toward the corral, carrying a chicken saddle under one arm, and his own big single-fire rig under the other. . . .

A few minutes later, as Julie came up to the corral gate, the foreman was tight-

ening the cinch-straps of the smaller saddle to a dun mare. The mare was an old horse, long gentled, that Long Tom Swiggart had kept in his cavvy more for the use of greeners and dude visitors than anyone else.

Ken Carpenter's eyes showed embarrassed surprise as Julie said, a dry coldness tempering her voice, "Taking her sightseeing, Ken?" And he whipped around, heeling over on one foot with the suddenness of his spin.

"Morning, Julie," he said, then, his dark-tanned face staining into sudden color. He made a disgruntled gesture with his hand, adding, "Miss Marvin asked me to show her around a bit. I don't know that you'd call it sightseeing."

"Just a romantic tour," said Julie, with thinly veiled sarcasm. "And a chance for her to throw those green come-hither eyes at her new foreman."

"Now, Julie—"

"So you are her foreman now!"

"Julie, you don't understand. I'm sorry about Big Jim. But a whack at ramrod pay will mean a lot to me, right now. Anyway, for a few months until I can get—"

"Until you can get in the catbird's seat with her!"

An angry scowl built up on Ken Carpenter's lean, high-boned face. "That's just not so, and you know it," he answered in a nettled tone. "I told you yesterday about Sam Texler. If I can collect foreman's wages here for just six months, I might be able to make a deal with Sam."

Suddenly Julie felt her own temper fraying as she remembered the dull look of resignation on her father's face when she had talked to him a few minutes earlier.

"Mark Templeton needs another man," she snapped. "If you had any feeling of friendship or loyalty for dad, you'd tell off Miss Bossy Pants right now!"

"Certainly," agreed a low, husky voice from behind her. "Do that if you like, Ken. But first I'd better advise you that Miss Bossy Pants is raising her foreman's scale by thirty dollars a month, starting now."

With a startled gasp, Julie spun around and saw Pearl Marvin. The owner of Andiron was standing a few paces behind her, dressed fetchingly in a divided green riding skirt and a white bolero jacket, with a pert little bottle-green hat perched jauntily on top of her wavy black hair. Julie envied her cool poise, and at the same moment was conscious of a tense, angry expectancy running through her.

She glanced curtly at Pearl Marvin's slim, fine-boned face, then abruptly fixed her eyes on Ken Carpenter.

"There's your chance," she told him scoffingly. "What's the matter—the cat got your tongue? Can't you say thanks to the nice lady?"

"I—" began Ken.

But Pearl Marvin cut him off, her pale, sea-water green eyes fastening with an expression of cool mockery on Julie's angrily stiff-set face.

"I can say something—to you," she told Julie arrogantly. "Don't meddle in business that doesn't concern you. This is strictly a private matter between Mr. Carpenter and myself. It does not concern discharged personnel."

Julie's face went white. Then, taking two swift forward steps, she stood tensely before the tall, slender figure of the city woman. "I ought to slap your face for that!" she cried. "It's a pity to spoil your artistic makeup, but—" Her small right hand flew back, but never reached its target. Ken Carpenter lunged and gripped her arm as it prepared to strike.

"For heaven's sake, Julie! Are you out of your mind?"

"I'm not, but you are!" Julie delivered a savage kick at his shin boot, but the foreman's grip on her arm did not relax.

From the corner of one eye she saw Pearl Marvin step daintily back out of range, her shiny mouth budding into an expression of derisive amusement.

Then the owner of Andiroin turned, idling a glance back at Julie and saying, "You can bring the horses around to the house, Ken. But please hurry. Children bore me, especially when they lack the breeding to be seen, but not heard!"

Julie swallowed convulsively. Pearl Marvin was starting back toward the house, the riding skirt swishing gracefully about her slender ankles. A cold fury welled in Julie as her pointed boot lashed furiously again at Ken Carpenter's shin.

"Breeding!" she blurted out fiercely. "That painted-up city hussy talking to *me* about breeding! Look at her, all spraddled out in war paint and fancy store-boughts like a dress store dummy! And you—you—"

"Julie! Will you listen to me?"

"No! You're carrying a torch for her so bad you can't see straight. You'll be no foreman here. You'll be her faithful man Friday, and heaven knows what else!"

Ken sighed grimly. "Julie," he said, "stop acting like a jealous little chunkhead. I'm going to be just what she's paying me to be—the ramrod at Andiron, and that's all. And it will only be temporary—just till I can get together enough money to—"

"Enough money to squire her around town and show her off to the local yokels!" Julie finished for him vehemently. With an abrupt wrench, she tore free from him, panting. "And if you think I'm jealous of that—that—"

"I *hope* you're not," Ken interrupted her softly. "But just in case you are, before you and Big Jim leave"—he advanced toward her, his gray eyes earnestly grave—"I want you to take something with you."

He bent forward abruptly. Then, before she could either know his intention or resist it, he kissed her softly, sweetly, on the mouth.

For a bare instant, she was taken aback by surprise, his sincerity discomfiting and disorienting her momentarily. It made it hard for her to choose between the fact of this brief intimacy and the bitter knowledge of how easily, from now on, he could transfer these kisses to a riper, redder pair of lips.

Her taut, held-back fury abruptly reached its breaking point. "Thank you, Ken," she said evenly. "Thank you very much. And here is something for you to take with *you*." And her right hand flicked out like the striking paw of a cat, and slapped hard and stingingly across his cheek.

She was running from him, then—running and sobbing—and when she at last reached the haven of the little tenant house and flung herself down on the bed in her room, she began crying with great heaving gasps. At last, when all the pent-up anger and frustration and bitterness in her had been washed free, she was left with a feeling of complete exhaustion, and a dead, uncaring despair.

WHEN Big Jim Kelso told Julie of his own plan to hunt for some real estate in the Long Trail Valley area, mentioning, with fatherly concern, that maybe Ken Carpenter might eventually like to throw in with them, Julie thought she'd cannip.

They had been established at Mark Templeton's MT-Connected for a week, and while the little cabin in which they were now installed was pleasant enough, it was a far cry from the commodious tenant house they had occupied at Andiron. Julie hadn't yet fully accustomed herself to it.

It was at breakfast that Big Jim had brought up the possibility of starting an iron of his own, and quitting MT-Connected as soon as he could find a likely location. Mark Templeton, he said, could acquire another foreman.

"I heard today," he told Julie with a feigned off-handedness, "that the old Bancroft place might go on the auction block in maybe three, four weeks. I know Ken's

got his eye on Sam Texler's place, but Bancroft's is bigger. If Ken was interested, we might be able to work out some kind of a partnership deal."

Julie studied the drawn look on Big Jim Kelso's face, and was torn between her concern for him and the problem of her own blighted hopes.

"All Ken Carpenter is interested in," she declared flatly, "is making time with Pearl Marvin, and not a thing else! If you want Bancroft's for us, Dad, go ahead and look into it. But leave Ken out of it—he has other irons in the fire."

"Fiddle-faddle!" Big Jim finished his second cup of coffee and stood up from the breakfast table, stooping to kiss her gently on top of the head. "You and Ken had a little lovers' spat, but that's soon mended. Now you stop fretting yourself, or first thing you know I'll be forgetting I've got a nineteen-year-old daughter, and take you over my knee."

But after her father had gone out, the thin smile Julie had given him quickly faded. She and her father had each been trying to buoy up the other, one about as unsuccessfully as the other. Big Jim was still hurt and resentful at the raw treatment he had received from the new owner of Andiron. And in Julie herself, Ken Carpenter's refusal to quit Andiron remained like an ugly festering wound, deep within her.

She began clearing the breakfast table, going about the chore with an abstracted disinterestedness. Just yesterday she had driven in to Rosadero to buy a few staples at the Eagle Mercantile and had seen Ken hand Pearl Marvin down from the Andiron buckboard in front of the Bon Ton. It was a display of gallantry that had been like gall and wormwood to her. A moment later, Pearl Marvin had disappeared into the store, and Ken had seen her and called out to her across the street.

She had coldly ignored him. But a few minutes later, when she had come out of the Eagle, he had been waiting for her outside, under the wooden awning.

"That's quite an armful of groceries you've got," he told her, with a weak smile. "Maybe you'd better let me load 'em into the spring wagon for you."

"I think," she had answered frigidly, "that you will find your loading job is on the other side of the street." And she had brushed past him brusquely, dumping her bundles into the back of the spring wagon.

At that moment, Pearl Marvin had stepped from the doorway of the Bon Ton, laden with three long boxes that had obviously contained new suits or dresses. For a bare instant, then, Ken had divided a torn glance between her and Pearl Marvin, as the city girl had remained poised on the step of the dry goods store, her red mouth flattened in a sulky pout as she had waited for him to come to her assistance.

With a vicious slam, Julie had closed the tail-gate of the wagon, then, relishing the foreman's discomfiture with an icy smile, had turned and crossed around the wagon to the driver's seat.

Ken had blurted, "Julie—wait!" But even as he had spoken, his worried gaze had been toward the Bon Ton, and she had gathered up her reins, saying spitefully, "I could—but you had better not!" And then she had slapped briskly at the flanks of her team of matched grays.

Over her shoulder, a few seconds later, she had seen Ken walking down to the buckboard toting the bundles, with Pearl Marvin's hand tucked cosily under his arm. Then he had been helping her fussily into the rig, and she had turned her gaze from them, a cold sinking sensation settling heavily to the pit of her stomach.

Later, she had learned the reason for Pearl Marvin's visit to the Bon Ton. Tonight Pearl Marvin was holding a get-together at Andiron, a party to which she had invited nearby ranchers and their wives as an ostensible gesture of neigh-

borliness. But now, mechanically going through the motions of washing the breakfast dishes, Julie Kelso thought she knew the real reason for this sudden burst of hospitality and community spirit on the part of Andiron's new owner.

She thought bleakly, this is just what Miss Bossy Pants has been waiting for—a chance to get herself all fumadiddled up and really go to town on Ken.

The dishes finished, Julie went out and found herself heading for the corral. Maybe a ride would do her good—physical activity might take her mind off herself for a short time. But once she had reached the corral, a dull feeling of listlessness overcame her, and she sank down on a flat rock beside the gate and sat with her hand cupped to her chin, staring off moodily into space.

Riding off by herself—alone—wasn't the answer, she decided. Neither was moping around the house all day, once she had finished her chores. *Then what was?* Certainly it did no good for her just to sit here and think. At least, not to sit here and think about a worthless woman-chaser like Ken Carpenter!

To begin with, she had to awaken herself to the realization that that much of her life was water over the dam, and the sooner she did realize it, the better off she'd be. Probably plenty of girls had found themselves in this kind of a boat—one with a leaky bottom—so what had they done? Found themselves a more seaworthy craft, naturally! A man, for example, who appreciated honesty and maybe a fair amount of good looks more than he did a sinuous hip-wriggle and a pair of green cat's eyes!

But where to start—and how— That was the squestion. Maybe she'd ride in to town and see her friend, Tilly Blackmon. Maybe if she opened up her heart to Tilly, and they had a good woman-to-woman talk together—

A voice behind her said, "A book of verses underneath the bough, a jug of wine, a loaf of bread—and thou." And as she swung about with a half-guilty start and saw Mark Templeton, he grinned down at her, adding drolly, "There's a bough about twenty yards away, but that still leaves us without a jug or a loaf."

"Or a 'thou,'" she said, summoning a faint smile. "Hello, Mark. I—I guess I was just—woolgathering."

"We can't allow woolgathering," he said. "At least not on a cow spread. But maybe I could pinch-hit for the 'thou'—if you'd just push over a bit and let a man take a load off his feet."

Julie bounced to the far end of the stone. "It's your rock," she said pertly. "Help yourself."

EXCEPT for dancing with him a couple of times when he had cut in for her at neighborhood stomps, Julie had never known Mark Templeton very well. But now, studying him with a sudden speculative interest, she was aware of a rangy, solidly muscled figure, with a rather square, bronzed face and deep-set brown eyes in which a quizzically amused twinkle seemed permanently embedded.

"I was looking for you, Julie," he said, seating himself beside her and taking off his hat.

Julie observed that his hair, of a pleasant sandy color, had been freshly dressed with a wet comb, giving it a clean sparkling look which she suddenly found herself comparing with Ken Carpenter's unruly Indian-black thistle-top.

"I wanted," continued Mark Templeton, "to ask you a question, Julie."

Julie hooked tanned arms around her knees, giving him a quizzical sidelong look. "Animal, vegetable or mineral?" she teased.

"Why," said Mark Templeton carefully, "this one I guess you'd call a bit on the personal side. I wanted to ask if you'd care to go to a dance with me."

A tiny shiver of excitement rippled through Julie. And suddenly she realized that here was the answer to her own question, the question any girl on the rebound eventually asks herself: *Where is the next man?* She looked up at Mark Templeton's ruddy, not unhandsome face, and was conscious of only a momentary half-guilty pang, saying, "Why, I'd be delighted, Mark. When is it?"

"Tonight."

"Tonight! But I didn't know of any—"

"At Andiron," he said, watching her eyes. "I know you're not too keen about the new owner, but she invited me. And if she lives up to the laws of Western hospitality, she can't very well tell me who I'm to bring."

Julie shook her head. "I don't know, Mark. If it were anywhere else—"

He grinned. "Next thing, you'll tell me you have nothing to wear. Shucks, you're not going to let a female swivel dude jockey you out of a little fun, are you?"

Julie grimaced. "But I really haven't anything to wear, Mark. I'd have to go to town. I—I don't know what to say, really."

Mark Templeton stood up, grinning. "Translated from the female, I'd say that meant yes."

"Well—all right, Mark! But I might as well warn you. I have a very special reason for doing this—not to mention a particularly bad habit of sticking my chin out when I ought to keep it poked back where it belongs!"

"Maybe," he murmured, with a cryptic smile, "we both have special reasons." He swung around, adding, "Pick you up about eight." And then he was walking away, and, staring after him, Julie was left with a sudden appalling awareness of having committed herself to an act of supreme and final folly.

* * *

That evening, however, when Mark Templeton halted his buggy outside the gayly lighted quadrangle of lawn in front of the Andiron ranch house and Julie saw Ken Carpenter and Pearl Marvin kicking up their heels with a dozen or so other couples dancing on the hard-packed grass, she was suddenly, spitefully glad that she had responded to the angry impulse that had brought her here.

The scene before them was a festive one. Chains of jack-o'-lanterns were festooned from tree to tree around the outskirts of the yard. And off to one side, beside a plank table loaded with biscuits and pies and fried cakes, Von Yeager, the Andiron grub-wrangler, was barbecuing a whole half steer from a great iron spit hung over a bed of glowing wood embers.

Mark Templeton handed Julie down from the buggy, murmuring, "Quite a shindig. What would you like to do first, Julie—eat or dance?"

Julie, her glance fixed stonily on Ken Carpenter and Pearl Marvin posturing with exaggerated gusto in each other's arms, answered tersely, "Dance." And in the next moment they had joined the gay throng on the greensward and were linked in a do-ce-do.

The fiddle music had an entrancing lilt, and the voice of the caller was bull-strong and stentorian, chanting:

Swing 'em once let 'em go,
All hands left and do-ce-do.

You swing me and I'll swing you,
And we'll all go to heaven in the same old shoe . . .

Julie responded to the patter with a show of enthusiasm for Mark Templeton's sake, but if her feet were not like lead, her heart felt that way. And when she noticed the sheepish, oxlike way Ken Carpenter was looking down at the lacquered, manikin-like face of Pearl Marvin, it seemed to sink like a dead weight to the pit of her stomach.

There comes a girl I used to know,
Swing her once and let her go.

At that moment Ken Carpenter saw her,

and Julie saw his mouth fall open in a look of startled shock. In town that afternoon she had purchased a dress of almost shocking décolleté. It was a filmy creation with a tight bodice and full-flounced skirt that swirled about her ankles like emerald foam. And now, aware that Ken was still staring at her, open-mouthed, her throat trembled in a little lilting laugh as she pressed her glance back on Mark Templeton's ruddy face, and the caller's chant went on:

> Grab your partner and sail away,
> Hurry up, it's breaking day.

Then it was over, and Julie, aware that her escort was looking down at her in a queer, studying way, murmured, "If you wouldn't mind, Mark, I'd like to go back to the buggy for my jacket. This night air is a little chilly when you're not dancing."

"That dress you're wearing," said Mark Templeton dryly, "isn't exactly made to keep out air. Not," he added quickly, "that you don't look plumb adorable in it, Julie."

"Thank you, Mark. Maybe—maybe I did go a bit overboard with it. But if you understood—"

"I do, Julie. More than you know, perhaps." They were almost to the row of buckboards and rigs and saddle horses lined up at the edge of the yard when Mark Templeton turned, as if at a sudden sound, and glanced back across his shoulder. Then he halted abruptly and turned, saying, "We're going to have to meet our host, Julie. And I think maybe it may get really chilly around here in another minute."

Wheeling slowly, Julie saw Pearl Marvin hurrying toward them from the press around the refreshment table, making urgent beckoning motions with her right hand. Even Julie, at that moment, had to admit that the mistress of Andiron was a compellingly beautiful woman. Wearing a black satin gown that fitted her voluptuous figure like a glove, her only adornments were an emerald glass necklace that flashed above the slender column of her throat like green fire and a pair of pendant jade earrings that dangled intriguingly from the shell-pink tips of her ears.

Julie had the despairing thought: I should have worn green earrings myself, and then Pearl Marvin was up to them and gushing, "Mr. Templeton! I am so glad you could come. I have been so *very* anxious to meet all my neighbors that I thought a get-together would be the best means to round everybody up. There!" She sighed in amused deprecation, shrugging coquettishly. "I've used a Western colloquialism, haven't I? Roundup!"

"It would seem so," murmured Mark Templeton dryly. He added perfunctorily, "You have made a splendid party, Miss Marvin. Allow me to congratulate you on its success."

Julie could have been a stone wall, a tree—anything but a vividly pretty girl with flashing red hair and a face that suddenly went white as linen as Pearl Marvin stared unseeingly past her, at Mark Templeton.

Pearl Marvin said, "Thank you so much, Mr. Templeton, and do have fun. And now I must rush off. So many people, you know, and just one hostess—so, if you will excuse me. . . ." She was going away, then, with an airy wave of her hand, and suddenly Julie felt Mark Templeton's arm closing around her waist, not, she sensed, with any designing intimacy, but more in a gesture of comfort.

"She is a stupid and jealous woman. You must not mind her, Julie," he said softly.

Julie Kelso's voice was hard and flat, saying, "I don't. But if I ever get a chance to pay her back for that—"

"I think," said Mark Templeton quietly, "you will. And maybe sooner than you expect."

Julie's glance ran toward the buggy. Then she quivered. "Mark, if you would fetch my jacket. . . ."

A HARD, ear-stopping anger was still beating through Julie, so that she didn't see the tall, shambling figure emerge from the group at the refreshment table, or hear the swish of footfalls through the grass as a man's shadowy shape built larger toward them through the darkness. But Mark Templeton both saw and heard, and abruptly he seized Julie's arms, surprising her with the sudden vehemence in his voice.

"Julie, listen to me! I am going to kiss you. But you mustn't be frightened."

And then, before she could cry out or resist, even had she wanted to, Mark Templeton's arms enfolded her in a crushing hug. Then his mouth closed against hers in a prolonged and deliberate kiss.

Julie was conscious only of a weary listlessness from the strong, steady pressure of Mark Templeton's mouth fastened to her own. But her head had dropped back and a feeling of uncaring resignation was winding through her when the voice, sharp and imperative behind her, said, "Let go of her, Mark!" And at the same instant an outthrust hand jolted against the ranch owner's shoulder and Julie saw the sternly stiff-set face of Ken Carpenter pushing in between them.

"Ken!" she blurted. "You get out of here! You have no right—"

"I've got as much right as he has and more—I hope!"

"You hope," said Mark Templeton mildly. "And so do I, Ken."

A puzzled scowl built slowly on Ken Carpenter's leanly planed face. "I don't get it," he muttered.

Julie, observing the faint twinkle in Mark Templeton's eyes, did, suddenly. "Ken," she said, "I want to talk with Mark a minute—alone. Then if there is still something you want to say to me, you can say it."

"I've got plenty to say," grumbled Ken.

"Then save it for a minute," Julie said, and pulled Mark Templeton's arm, guiding him back toward the buggy.

"Mark," she said, then, when they were finally out of earshot of Ken Carpenter, "I want to compliment you—on your acting ability."

"Just don't tell your friend Tilly Blackmon about this," Mark Templeton said. "It's been a secret till now, but Tilly and I are going to be married next month." Smilingly, he said, "I'll wait for you in the buggy. I've got a kind of crazy notion that we may have a passenger going back with us."

Returning to the rim of the yard a moment later, Julie came to a halt in front of Ken Carpenter and said simply, "Well? You said there was something you wanted to tell me, Ken."

Staring down into her ingenuously veiled eyes, Ken Carpenter seemed at a loss for words momentarily. Then, with a rough impulsiveness, he pulled her abruptly into his arms.

"I gave Miss Bossy Pants notice today," he blurted out hollowly.

"That's nice," Julie said noncommittally.

"I told you," Ken went on in a strained voice, "why I wanted that extra money. It was for the Texler place—for—for us, Julie. It may take me some longer to get it, now."

"Maybe," said Julie in a teasing deliberative tone, "I could wait—just the teensiest bit longer."

"Well, if you could. What I mean is, Julie—"

"Show me, Ken," Julie interrupted him softly, "just what you *do* mean."

The music was starting up again.

Then it went away from her awareness completely. Her head fell back under the ardent pressure of Ken Carpenter's lips, and with a glad singing in her ears she realized that the meaning was being sealed for both of them—forever. ♥ ♥ ♥

# THE QUEEN OF HEARTBREAK

By ARTHUR LAWSON

**The rangeland bully tried to corner lovely Ethel's stock o' kisses. . . . Would the man she'd kept 'em for put up a fight to win back her dreams?**

FOR the first time in his life, Jim Sears actually enjoyed watching a blizzard. His little house was snug, the fire at his back was warm, and a covered shed led to his new, sturdy barn. After he finished milking, he could wash up in comfort, then hike up the road a couple of hundred yards to Ethel McClosky's birthday party.

Somehow the snow slashing against the windows and the wind in the chimney added to Jim's feeling of security and accomplishment. He thought of Ethel—a funny sort of girl she was, coming down here to straighten up his house while he was in the barn doing his evening chores. She had made a habit of it lately.

The door blew open and Ethel's kid brother came in with a drift of snow. He was twelve years old, thin from growing too fast, and had become defiant in small ways. Jim remembered when he, too, had been like that, pretending to be a man because he was afraid of not being a boy any more.

"Now what?" Jim asked.

The kid shrugged. Melted snow ran down his slicker to gather in a pool around his soggy calfskin boots.

"Von Kann rode in," the kid said. "He didn't bring that organ you were going to give to sis."

"Why not?" Jim asked sharply.

"His wagon broke down," the kid said. "Slipped on the ice and busted a spoke. He's up to our place sitting around and whittling a new one."

Quick anger swept Jim Sears. He had bought that little cottage organ from Von Kann as a birthday present for Ethel, who loved to sing but had no instrument for accompaniment. Von Kann, who had inherited the organ with the ranch, had promised to deliver it in time for the party, but had produced half a dozen reasons for not having brought it during the past week.

It was a long ride out to the Von Kann spread and back, doubly treacherous during a blizzard like this one. But Jim had planned for a long time to give that organ to Ethel if Von Kann would sell it, and Jim was a stubborn man. He glanced again at the snow slamming on the windows. It seemed to be more furious than ever. Jim thought of Ethel's lovely, wistful voice as she sang while straightening up his house. He made an abrupt decision.

"Okay, kid," he said. "I'll go out to

**Impulsively, she lifted her face to his. . . .**

Von Kann's. But don't tell anybody what I'm up to. This ought to be a surprise."

"I won't tell nobody," the boy said.

Jim said, "My cows have to be fed and milked, and that new bull needs his supper, too."

"I'll take care of them," the boy promised.

He shrugged out of his coat. As he did so, Jim noticed a bulge in the kid's breast pocket.

"You been smoking again?" Jim asked sharply. "Stealing tobacco again?"

The kid flared up. "I'm my own boss," he shouted. "Where I get my fixings is my own business."

Jim was sorry for the boy. The kid was trying to be a man before his time. This recent smoking was one of his ways of showing it, though he still had not gotten up enough nerve to smoke at home where he was sure of getting a licking.

"Just don't take a cigarette into my barn," Jim said.

"I got more sense than that," the boy told him. "I'm no stupid baby who's got to be lectured to all the time."

Jim was not so sure that the kid was right, but there seemed to be no point in saying so. There were times when it was best to leave a boy alone.

JIM DECIDED on taking the light farm wagon and the two big horses instead of the buckboard. There would be heavy drifts along the eight miles of frozen ruts that formed the trail to the Von Kann place and he wanted an outfit strong enough to fight through them. He wrapped a bottle of hot, rum-spiked coffee in a blanket to use as a foot-warmer on his way out. On the way back it would have cooled off too much to keep his feet warm, but he reckoned he would be able to find some other use for it. He shrugged into his fleece-lined canvas coat and led the two horses outside.

Though it was midafternoon, the sky was already dark. In the lee of the barn, drifts were deep and fluffy and the cold hardly noticeable. But after he had tucked the buffalo robe around his knees and had driven the horses past the edge of the little white house, the wind hit him solidly. He had to use his whip to drive the balky team into the whining gale. The wheels crunched over new snow and onto the road that always was a rutted torture of mud, dust or ice, according to the season.

When they reached the McClosky place, the horses followed their habit of turning off the road into the shelter of the long log building. Jim threw the robes over the horses and went inside. McClosky had built his combination store, home and saloon during a period of fine weather and had not thought of heading it away from the wind. A ribbon of snow rushed across the roughly floored room, dancing over the sawdust to hiss against the big iron stove. Jim had to shove hard with his shoulder to close the door.

Flint Von Kann, sitting with his feet on the nickel-plated rail of the stove, stopped talking long enough to glance around to see who had come in. He had been facing an open doorway behind a pine counter while he whittled on a hickory billet.

"Come on in," he said jovially. "No day for working. Have a hot buttered rum on me, Jim?"

Jim had never liked Flint, even when they were kids in school, though he had never been able to explain to himself exactly why, and had always tried to get along with his neighbor.

"Rum sounds good, Flint," Jim said. "Only you got to let me treat you when I get back."

"Going somewhere?" Flint asked.

"Got some steers in the breaks down by the river," Jim said. "I'm goin' to look them over to see if they're in trouble."

"That's a hell of a note, riding the river on a day like this," Flint said. Then he shouted toward the doorway, "Service—girl!"

He was joking, of course, but it annoyed Jim just the same that anybody would talk to Ethel like that. Yet she was laughing when she came in with a wooden tray holding two fragrantly steaming drinks. Ethel didn't take after her father or kid brother in any way. Her father was a crazy, wild Irishman who had come over from the old country to help build the Northern Pacific Railroad. Her mother had been of native stock, part mountain folk, part voyageur, and may be a dash of Sioux. If Ethel's kid brother had inherited the worst of these strains, she had certainly gotten the best—her father's blue eyes, her mother's dark hair, and skin ripe as a freshly picked peach. She was eighteen today in a country where a girl was on the way to being an old maid if she had not hog-tied her man yet.

Jim lifted his drink from the tray.

"To the Queen of Mormon Ferry!" he toasted.

Ethel laughed, her voice ringing young and free through the log shack. Flint took his drink with an extravagant gesture.

"Long may she reign."

They drank, and the old song echoed through Jim.

How old are you, my pretty little miss?
How old are you, my honey?
She answered with a shy little smile,
"I'll be sixteen next Sunday."

It hardly seemed that two years had passed since Ethel was sixteen. But time moves fast when a man is busy, and Jim had been working from before dawn to after dusk ever since he was a youngster fighting for the day when he would have a ranch of his own. Now he had it, and he no longer needed to look up to any man.

A gust of wind rattled the shakes on the roof. It was pleasant in here, even though the presence of Flint Von Kann contributed nothing but annoyance to Jim. Flint glanced across at Ethel in a manner that thoroughly annoyed Jim. He leaned back in his chair.

"On a day like today," he said, "I'm sure glad I sold off all my stock last fall. Come spring I won't be counting up the dead steers along the drift fence."

"Come spring," Jim said, "you won't be counting up *any* steers."

That didn't phase Flint.

"I'll have some jingle left in my pocket," he boasted. "I can get me a foreman's job up on one of those big ranches near Sheridan. A little house comes with a foreman's job."

"We'll sure be sorry to see you go," Jim said sarcastically.

Flint laughed. He knew how Jim felt toward him.

"With a little house, a good job, and some money in the bank, a man might get himself a little wife," said Flint, obviously referring to how Ethel would go chasing after him. "A foreman's wife don't have to worry all the time or work herself to death. Have another rum on me, Jim?"

"No, thanks," Jim said. He noticed that Ethel was blushing, her breath coming faster than usual. He set his glass on the tray. "Be seeing you all."

Wind shook the building as Ethel followed Jim to the door. He had to kick it to loosen the latch, and then shove hard to get it open. Ethel's flannel skirt whipped against her legs and her sweater moulded close to her lovely figure as she led Jim around the corner out of the gale's blast.

"You better go back inside," Jim said.

Her short nose was pink with the cold, her blue eyes bright. She had been a little girl so recently it was hard to realize that she was a grown and desirable woman. It had taken Von Kann's inferences to make Jim really look at her.

"Don't let Flint bother you," she said.

"He doesn't mean anything to me," Jim said. "I've already forgotten him."

She smiled up at him. "You'll be home for the party?"

"Sure thing," he promised. "I never missed one of your parties yet."

"Be careful," she said.

Impulsively, she pulled him close and lifted her face to his. She kissed him full on the mouth. For a moment, her arms were around his neck, holding tightly to him. Then she let go and ran around to the rear of the building and let herself in at the kitchen door where she would not have to fight the wind. Jim just stood there in the snow for a while. Ethel had never kissed him before.

WHEN McClosky had first come to this country, Ethel was only eight and the kid was two. The boy's mother had not lived long enough to give him a name and it had not occurred to anybody else to do it for her. McClosky had been looking for a place where he could build a saloon and settle down. When he reached Mor-

mon Ferry the river was in flood stage, the ferry had been washed downstream, and McClosky had been marooned for several days on the nearest high ground.

"Hell," he told Ethel. "Any place in Montana is as good as any other for a saloon."

So he settled right there, and stayed even when the Mormons abandoned their ferry station. You could cross over the river in summer when the water was low enough to be forded, or in the winter when the river was frozen. In between times, McClosky or one of his children would row passengers across while their horses swam.

Summer or winter, Jim always crossed as fast as he could. He liked the chill spray kicked up by the horses during warm weather fording. In winter, he hurried for another reason—he had pulled out so many frozen or drowned cattle he hated the river when ice was formed.

On this afternoon, the horses took the slope to the river at a gallop. Their calks bit into the clear ice that the wind had swept clean and polished. The wagon skidded behind them. Jim bellowed like a Sioux and the team rushed up the more gentle bank of the far side onto the rutted road to the Von Kann place. Jim settled into the buffalo robe. With booted feet he felt for the wrapped bottle of rum and coffee. He knew that it was only his imagination that made him feel less cold when he touched it, since the amount of heat left in the bottle would hardly warm a gnat.

Though the mercury was rushing down toward zero and the snow bit at his face like tiny shards of glass fired from a shotgun, Jim found himself beginning to enjoy the fight. Constantly he had to battle the horses to keep them from turning their tails to the storm to run home through the endless world of gray sky and white snow that blended together into one smothering void.

Only the ruts underneath the occasional bush at the side told him that he was still on the road. Then he found the broken barbed-wire fence of the Von Kann place with its cedar posts standing starkly in the snow, and he turned into the yard and let his horses find their shelter in the lee of the house. He was surprised that he had gotten this far without any trouble.

He covered the horses, shoved open the door and stepped inside. Flint lived here all alone. It had been a fine house once, the neatest in the valley while Flint's mother lived. Now there were dirty dishes on the table, dust everywhere and a couple of bottles standing among other refuse in the corner. One thing immediately obvious and very puzzling to Jim was a half full whiskey bottle standing on a cleared space on the table. Von Kann never left a bottle until it was empty.

Jim shrugged it off as nothing important. The bedroom door was closed, the kitchen shut off. Flint apparently had moved into this one room for the winter.

The strange anger that hit Jim sometimes when he met Flint, gripped him now. It was well known that Flint had been asking Ethel to marry him ever since she was sixteen and had begun to round out. Offering to bring her here seemed like a slap in the face, a direct insult.

Well, it was no business of Jim's how Flint lived or whom he wanted to marry. Jim dusted off the little organ with one of Flint's dirty shirts. He found a comforter in the bedroom with which he securely wrapped the instrument to protect it from the snow, and carried it to the door, where he set it down a moment. Glancing back a moment, he wondered about that half-full bottle placed so handily for anyone who might enter. He was even tempted to take a snort, but decided to load the organ on the wagon first.

He carried it outside, stowed it away with a tarpaulin over it, and started back toward the house. Part way there, he

stopped. He remembered now that the house had been cold, as if Flint had let the fire go out early in the morning. Yet it had not been until afternoon that the boy had come down to tell Jim that Flint had not brought in the organ.

Flint, Jim began to suspect, was up to some devious scheme. On impulse, he fought through the snow to the wagon-shed. Sure enough, a spoke was broken. Jim hunkered down to study it carefully. He could not be sure, but it seemed to have been smashed with a piece of cord-wood. It did not look as if it had been broken by accident.

There was a pattern here that Jim was beginning to follow. The wagon deliberately disabled so Jim would have to go out for the organ or have no present for Ethel —the offer of the hot rum to delay him— the planting of the whiskey bottle on the table to trap Jim into a drink or two that would delay him further. It had all been set up to keep Jim away until after dark— or for the whole night.

Grimly, Jim climbed back into the wagon and headed the horses for home. Though the gale was no longer in his face, Jim's cheeks began to sting. It was a pleasantly warm but deceptive feeling, meaning that he was in danger of being frostbitten. He swung his arms to keep the blood circulating, and constantly called to his horses, as much for company as to urge them on. With gloved hands he cradled his face until he had warmed it up a little. Then he unwrapped the rum-spiked coffee and took a good, deep swig.

Though it was hardly lukewarm, it had authority. Jim glanced around a couple of times to see if the organ was riding all right. He smiled with the memory of the warm kiss and clinging arms of Ethel McClosky. A month ago, if anyone had told him that Ethel would kiss him, he would have laughed. If he had been told that he would be eager for another, he would have laughed louder. He had known her since she was a little kid. He had always liked her, and had been very appreciative of how she had taken to tidying his place for him. But he hadn't thought of her as a girl to be kissed.

Jim had to kick himself to keep awake, and stand up to stamp his feet in the rolling wagon. For a while he got down to run alongside the horses where the road had been swept clear of snow. Then he got back into the wagon and under the buffalo robe to uncork the bottle.

He was tucking it back into the blanket when he first noticed the red in the sky, like a sunset cutting through the gray overcast. Here it was still blowing and snowing, but this was a phenomenon he had seen before. Often at nightfall the weather would change; the sun would break through a rift in the clouds for a moment as if to promise a fine tomorrow. Then it would drop behind the mountains for the night.

So Jim was not alarmed at first. It was when he realized that the glow was too low for the setting sun that he began to whip the horses. He stood in the wagon lashing the big brutes.

But he got home too late. Not that he could have done anything. His barn was a total loss. The men of Mormon Ferry had saved his little house by shoveling snow on it. They had no pumps or hose, and if they had had some, the equipment would have frozen solid in minutes.

Jim stared bleakly at the glowing timbers, at the great red pile of his winter's hay supply kindled into new flames by the wind, stirring up like a volcano, then dying down again. Silhouetted against it was his big Studebaker wagon that the men had rescued. Someone had shoved his buckboard into a snowbank. One of his neighbors came up to him. The rest had gone back to McClosky's.

"Good stand of oak behind my house," the neighbor said. "Was thinking of thinning it out. Make good timbers. Could

cut them this winter. Come slack in the summer, folks would have a big time at a barn raising."

"Thanks," Jim said.

That's the way folks were here. They could help a man who was in trouble and make it seem like a carefree party. The wind stirred the fire in the hay like a little tornado in hell.

"Got your stock out," the neighbor said. Then he added reluctantly, "all but that thousand dollar bull."

Jim turned away. He stared at the lights of the McClosky place for a long time. Then he led his horses up to the McClosky barn when, without asking for permission, he shoved the door open and drove the team up the ramp.

THERE was animal warmth in here—the smell and sounds of other horses and of Jim's two milch cows lowing nervously from their recent terror. There was no room for Jim's wagon in the barn, so he unhitched the horses in the doorway and drove them inside. Hauling the door closed, he lit a lantern so he could look around and was very careful to extinguish the match before putting it in his pocket so there could be no accident. He hung the harness on a rack where the rats could not get to it and rubbed down the horses with a gunny sack. After taking them to their stalls he fed them with hay and oats. His legs made great, scissor-like shadows as he walked toward the front of the barn. The wind was only a dying sigh here. Jim would hardly know that there was a storm outside except for the siftings of snow under the door.

There was peace in the barn—a sort of peace that Jim had never known inside a house where lonesomeness always seemed to stay with him. Even in his new little house, so snug and tight, Jim had enjoyed watching the blizzard only because he planned to go into it soon and join with other people.

He lifted the globe of the lantern to blow out the flame. The butterfly light danced a moment, then died. Jim hung the lantern back on the hook and went outside. Red glow still lit the sky. The wind actually had eased some, but Jim shuddered as if he were exposed naked on the icy river. Then he went to the wagon to unload the present that he had brought for Ethel.

* * *

Even in the quilt and tarpaulin, frozen in a sheet of ice, the organ did not seem heavy to him. With it balanced on his shoulder, he plowed through the drifts to the back door of the McClosky place. The kitchen was hot. The old Sioux cook stared at Jim with black, inscrutable eyes, and edged away over by the stove. On the woodbox in the kitchen, young McClosky sat sullenly. His hand and forearm were inside his shirt, holding onto something. The tobacco pouch had disappeared.

"I didn't do it!" the boy said, his voice running high and cracking. "Nobody can make me say I did it!"

"Who said you did?" Jim asked.

"They all think I did—even if they don't say so." The boy was close to hysteria. He jumped to his feet. When the shirt flared a bit, Jim saw what he was hiding there. It was an old Frontier Colt pistol. Jim had never seen anyone so scared. It was this fear that might cause the kid to start shooting. "You can't hang it on me!" the boy insisted. "I never lit—"

McClosky stopped talking in the barroom. Nobody talked in there any more now. Uneasy feet scuffed. Glasses thumped nervously on the counter.

Ethel cried, "Jim!"

She had been sitting on the bar. Often she climbed up there and sang to her neighbors on a cold winter's night. It was during one of her performances that Jim got the idea of buying the organ that had not been used since Von Kann's mother died. Then Ethel could sit at it and play while she sang.

She jumped down to run to him in the doorway. Her blue eyes appeared to be almost black in contrast to the whiteness of her face. He smiled down at her, but he knew his smile was unconvincing.

"Look what I brought—" he started.

"It's terrible, Jim!" she cried. "We discovered it too late. I went down there after Junior finished the milking—and—" She broke down, sobbing, holding onto his shoulders.

"A man can always build another barn," Jim said.

The girl looked back at him with wide, damp eyes.

"He tried—that is, my brother tried to get that bull out, Jim," she explained fervently. "But the barn was already caving in."

"If a man feels like it, he can work for another bull," Jim said.

The boy had come to the doorway, waiting, half wild, with his gun. With surprising strength, Ethel twisted away from Jim so she was between him and her brother. Jim, still carrying the organ, took it over to the south wall where he got down on his knees to undo the lashings. The crowd gathered there failed to group around him. There was a curious aloofness to all of them, men and women alike, as if they did not want to have anything further to do with this affair.

The boy gulped. "You can't whup me, because—"

McClosky swallowed a drink of his third-rate liquor.

"You got my permission to lick the kid," the boy's father said. "He's got it coming to him. I don't know where he got the tobacco. I been keeping it locked up. But we found a sack on him after the fire."

Jim's fingers fumbled with the knots. He was not the man at ease that he presented to the audience. He had to be very careful with his words. He had to play out his part until he was absolutely sure what to do next.

"You men got my Studebaker out," he said in his slow way. "My horses are in good shape. I can work the rest of the winter hauling ties for the railroad." The tarp fell from the organ, but he still held the quilt against it, veiling it from the small crowd. "I'll need a lot of help cutting and hauling those ties—and I figure on getting it free from the feller who burned down my barn." His voice had become a low monotone. "He's going to work like sin. He's going to wish he was dead before I get through with him. But before I start off, I'm going to give him a licking he ain't likely to forget. Maybe it'll help to make a man of him."

It was a long speech for Jim. No one in the crowd moved or breathed, until young McClosky broke.

"You can't prove nothin'—" he bleated.

FLINT VON KANN'S dark face hardly hid its satisfaction. This affair seemed to be going his way, to be pleasing to him. Jim knew exactly what Flint expected him to do; beat up the kid and maybe lose Ethel's friendship, which meant more to Jim now than he had ever thought it would. He had discovered somewhere along the line that he loved Ethel—and he had learned, too, that he trusted the boy. Flint, in his tortuous way, had tried to ruin Jim—and had come mighty close to succeeding.

He dropped the quilt from the organ. He took off his heavy coat and threw it across the counter. The kid was hunched over his pistol hidden in his shirt. Jim grinned at him.

"It's okay, kid," Jim said. "You can watch my cows while Flint's cutting ties for me. Take it easy, boy—"

Flint said swiftly, "I've been here all day—whittling spokes. Ask Ethel. Ask Mac."

"I wouldn't know," Ethel said. "I was down at Jim's—and in my own room half the day."

"I went down to see if I'd caught any fish through that hole I cut in the ice," McClosky said. "Flint watched bar for me while I was down there." His eyebrows arched. "Now—who come in here while I was gone, Flint?"

Jim strode across the room. Flint gaped strangely.

"Hell, nobody!" he said. "You don't expect travelers on a day like today."

He had completely given himself away. Everyone here would have denied seeing him if they had not actually been here while he was supposed to be alone. Jim was satisfied.

"You busted that spoke on your wagon so I'd have to go out to your place for the organ. You waited almost until milking time to send the kid down. You gave him a sack of tobacco so I'd blame him for the fire." Guilt was plain on Flint's face, and the boy nodded automatically, confirming Jim. "You're a dirty skunk, Flint. I'm going to start cleaning you up."

Flint lost his nerve. He swung the spoke on which he had been whittling at Jim's head. Jim couldn't get out from under it in time.

Young McClosky yelled out something. The six-shooter blasted inside his shirt, setting fire to his underwear. The explosion and hum of the bullet that dug a hole in a log above Flint's head put him a little off balance as the heavy piece of hickory smashed down at Jim's head with a glancing blow that crashed against his shoulder. Jim grabbed the club with both hands, forcing the other man to his knee. Then he kicked Flint in the face.

It was a fight that is still talked about in that corner of Montana. Flint was tough and brutal, while Jim was slighter but faster. Jim was fighting for the girl he loved—while Flint was only trying to work off a grudge and save himself from a beating.

A wild fury swept through Jim, giving him the added power that finally smashed Flint to the floor and defeat. Flint swore bitterly.

"Okay, I did it when the old man went fishing," Flint said. "You've been getting everything—including Ethel cleaning your house—and that damn thousand dollar bull—"

He ran out of breath.

Jim stood over him, and he was no longer threatening.

"I didn't *get* any of it," Jim gasped. "I worked for it—and this winter I'm going to teach you how to do the same. Now, get up. I owe you a hot rum from before the trip to your place."

Wearily, Flint pushed himself up from the floor.

Tension was broken. Everyone talked at once.

"I brought you a little birthday present, Ethel," Jim said. "How about a tune? I'll play while you sing."

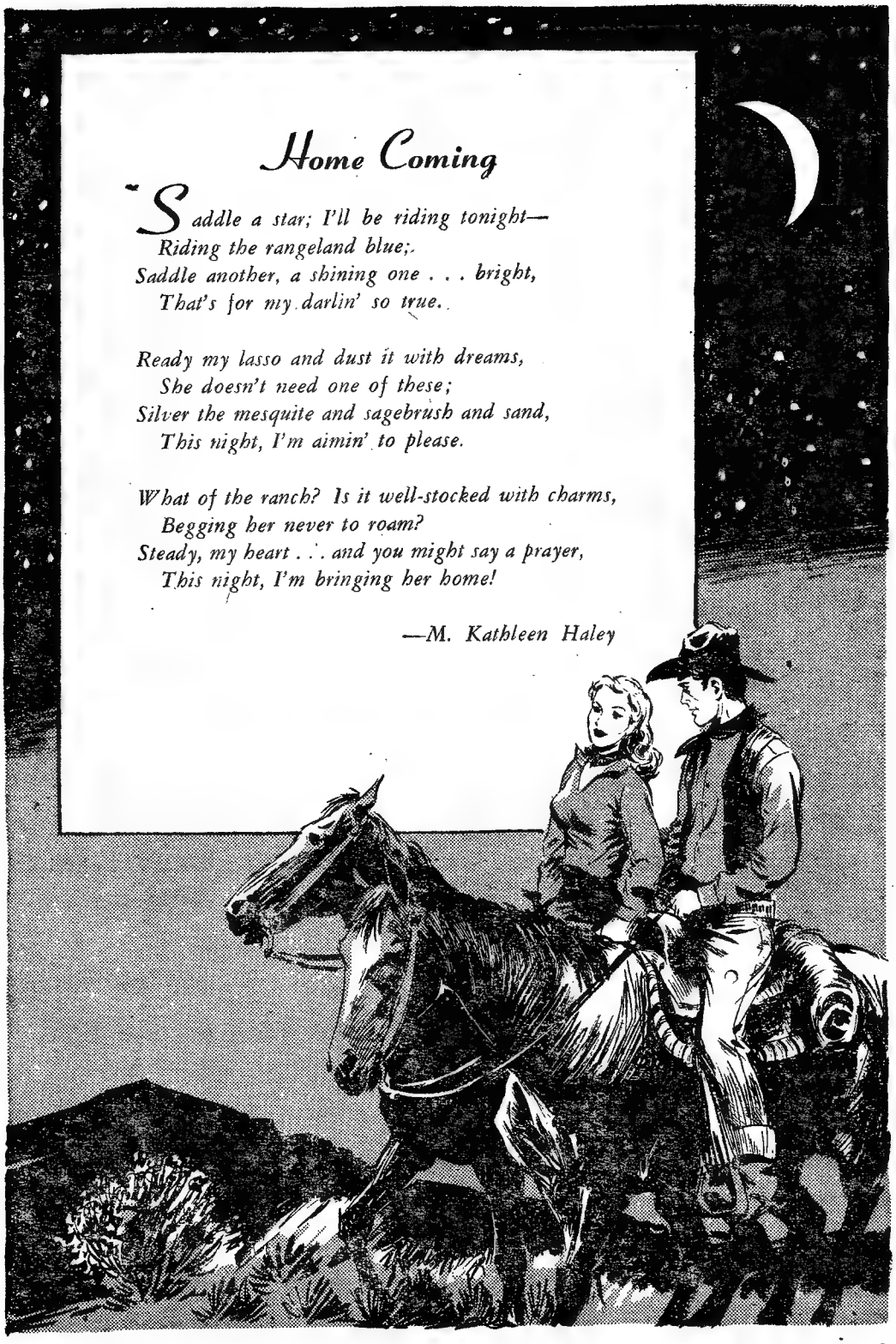
Ethel flung her arms around Jim and kissed him again, but with ardor mixed with relief. It was a long, warm kiss that left him weak in the knees, yet stronger than he had ever been before. He drew away from her and looked into her deep blue eyes.

"Maybe next summer—when I get the new barn up—" He faltered. "Maybe we can find somebody to play a wedding march."

"But I don't want to live in a barn," she said. The crowd laughed again. Her eyes were very big and soft. "Oh, Jim, do we have to wait any longer?"

Only Jim heard that plaintive question, and his heart took a great jump. He had been planning all along to have everything set before he took a wife. This winter he would be away all week. But he could come home Saturday nights to a warm and cheerful home—to Ethel.

"I'll ride down to the Junction tomorrow and fetch the parson," Jim said. Then he kissed her, holding her tight and kissing her hard. ♥ ♥ ♥



# Home Coming

*Saddle a star; I'll be riding tonight—*
*Riding the rangeland blue;*
*Saddle another, a shining one . . . bright,*
*That's for my darlin' so true.*

*Ready my lasso and dust it with dreams,*
*She doesn't need one of these;*
*Silver the mesquite and sagebrush and sand,*
*This night, I'm aimin' to please.*

*What of the ranch? Is it well-stocked with charms,*
*Begging her never to roam?*
*Steady, my heart . . . and you might say a prayer,*
*This night, I'm bringing her home!*

—*M. Kathleen Haley*

# SWEETHEART OF LONESOME TRAIL

By CARROLL FITZPATRICK

**Valerie knew there was gold at the end of that rainbow . . . but it was still another girl's claim. . . .**

She leaned down and kissed him. . . .

**Love and Danger on the Western Mining Camp Trails**

VALERIE HIGGINS operated a sort of mobile store and general errand service for the miners and prospectors who had stayed on in the Haunted Canyon country after the placer diggings gave out. Every one of these old-timers was sure that he would come across the mother lode any day now and, though Valerie

had long since become convinced that they would never find it, she never dared say so, especially to her father, whose mine was clear up at the head of the canyon. They never discussed the fact that her business was the only thing that kept them in groceries. Pa Higgins even went so far as to pretend that his daughter hauled groceries to the lonely miners just out of the kindness of her heart.

Once a week she set out for the tiny settlement of Ghost River, and she had to keep an exact schedule too, because her visits were red-letter days for the old-timers. It would never do for her to come a day late, so this Monday morning she hitched her mules, Mike and Ike, to the buckboard and set out early. Her first stop was in the canyon below One-eye Pete's diggings. Old Pete had died a couple of months back and a complete stranger who had read a somewhat fanciful newspaper account about Pete and the mine came into the canyon and took over the diggings. Since he was both young and a stranger, the other inhabitants of Haunted Canyon didn't trust him.

But when Valerie neared his place, her heart began acting strange and a buzzing set up in her ears.

"Hey!" she shouted. "Anything you want from town?"

The young miner—Valerie had heard his name was Dave Anderson—appeared at the door of the shanty that clung precariously to the side of the canyon a couple of hundred yards from the trail. She had never gotten a closer look at him than this, but the fact he was not much older than herself always excited her.

"There's a sack of quartz under that white rock just ahead of you," he shouted back. "Could you send it out to be assayed?"

That was mighty interesting news. One-eye Pete had never gotten anything out of his diggings worth assaying. Valerie wondered if this Anderson hombre didn't know his business and was just sending down some worthless rocks. They would find out soon enough. The flat, white stone was only a few yards from where her mules had stopped. She stepped down from the buckboard, turned over the rock, and hauled out the heavy sack. After hoisting it up onto the buckboard, she climbed back onto the seat and waved to Dave Anderson.

"Anything else?" she shouted.

"No, thanks," he hollered back. "But buy yourself a new dress, or something."

She drove off. One of her ancient pals farther down the canyon needed a new shovel—another had an order for groceries, and Salty O'Hara had written his usual letter to some lady who advertised in a matrimony magazine for a husband. Though Salty carried on a voluminous correspondence, he never managed to get in touch with a woman who suited him. All of Valerie's friends had requests of one sort or another, so it was late in the day when she pulled her Mike and Ike mules to a halt in front of Old Man Biddle's general store, sometimes known as "The Ghost River Emporium, What We Ain't Got, We'll Git."

Old Man Biddle's granddaughter, Betsy Biddle, was sitting out on the bench before the store looking very demure in a brand new dress and an elegant hair-do. Betsy was a pretty, curvacious girl who had men on her mind in a neighborhood where hombres her age were mighty sparse, but even Betsy did not usually get herself up in an outfit like this.

Her green, off-shoulder dress reflected its color in her green eyes and was a perfect contrast to her red curls that danced on white shoulders. In this rough country, Betsy always managed to retain the appearance of unblemished femininity. This had always amused Valerie, who couldn't avoid the sun and wind that left her skin brightly tanned. Dark-haired, blue-eyed Valerie had a mighty nice figure

too, not as luscious as Betsy's maybe, and not quite so obvious, since Valerie almost always wore jeans and a shirt.

Valerie smiled at the storekeeper's daughter as she climbed down from the buckboard.

"Hi, Betsy," she said. "Where's the party?"

"Oh, this!" Betsy smoothed the green dress over a nicely rounded thigh. "I just got tired of sitting around in rags." She set her knitting down on the bench, tried to look bored, and added, "See anything of that new hombre who's up at One-eye Pete's?"

"See him all the time," Valerie kidded Betsy. "He's always hanging around our place pretending he wants to play cribbage with my father."

"Maybe he really does want to play cribbage," Betsy said, piqued.

"If he does," Valerie kidded Betsy some more, "he sure has trouble keeping his mind on the game." She arched her chest. "Or his eyes!"

"I'll bet!" Betsy was definitely annoyed now.

Valerie was highly entertained. She walked around to the rear of the buckboard for the heavy sack of ore, which she let drop with a clank on the road. As she toted it up to the store, Betsy asked, "What's that?"

"Quartz," Valerie said absently. "Gold-bearing quartz."

BETSY'S curiosity was tremendous. The only gold-bearing quartz they had found in this neighborhood had been mixed with the placer that had long since been panned out of the river. It was a vein of gold-bearing quartz that the miners and prospectors were looking for. Whoever found it would make a real killing.

Valerie hauled the sack into the store. Betsy's grandfather was out back figuring sums in a ledger. Valerie banged the sack on the counter.

"Hi, Mr. Biddle," Valerie greeted. "That new man wants this assayed."

"Just another bag of rocks, most likely," Old Man Biddle growled. "Waste of money."

But he was as curious as his granddaughter, who had followed Valerie into the store. He slit the string holding the mouth of the sack closed, and poured the contents on the counter. For a full minute the two girls and the old-timer just stared at the quartz. They hardly dared breathe or speak. This was the precious stuff, all right, quartz chunks interlaced with heavy wire gold.

"Good grief!" Old Man Biddle burst out. "He found it. Everybody in the canyon looking for years, and this here stranger comes up and finds the mother lode, just like that, right where One-eye Pete spent most of his life digging."

Valerie's sudden intake of breath hurt her chest.

"Something funny about this," she said.

"You mean he's pulling some kind of trick?" Old Man Biddle asked.

"Maybe he salted that mine," Valerie suggested.

"It don't figure," the storekeeper said. "He couldn't fool nobody in these parts with a salted mine. I don't get it."

Betsy suddenly found her voice. "My goodness!" she cried. "Is it real?"

Valerie laughed at Betsy. "He's got a machine up there that makes it," she said. "It's counterfeit."

A shadow darkened the store door. Hastily, Old Man Biddle scooped the precious quartz back into the sack. At first, Valerie thought that the tall, lean man walking down the line of counters was Dave Anderson, who could have changed his mind after Valerie left and decided to go to town himself. Then she saw it wasn't Dave at all. This man was a complete stranger.

"Don't you girls tell nobody nothing about this," the storekeeper said in a hasty

whisper. Hiding the sack behind the counter, he smiled nervously at the newcomer. "Can I help you, mister?"

The bright hair and bare shoulders of Betsy Biddle caught the stranger's eye. He blinked quickly, glanced at Valerie, and back at Betsy. It had always been this way whenever a young man showed up, which was mighty rare—just a glance at Valerie, then full time for Betsy. It wasn't fair. The tall young man appeared to be paralyzed by the sight of this gorgeous girl. His Adam's apple bobbed as he gulped. Finally, with great effort, he tore his gaze away and glanced around at Old Man Biddle.

"Just passing through—" he said. His glance went back to Betsy. Apparently he couldn't even see Valerie. "Uh—maybe you know where I could find a hombre name of Luke Higgins."

Valerie's heart leaped up from the depths with a bang. Luke Higgins was her pa!

"Well, now, mister," Old Man Biddle told him, "this here is Luke's daughter, Valerie."

He jerked his thumb in the direction of Valerie, but the stranger eagerly took Betsy's soft little hand.

"I'm sure glad to meet you, Valerie!" he cried, shaking her hand vigorously and drowning in her green eyes while his pulse clattered like an overloaded donkey engine. "This is sure a pleasure. I can see that this is going to be a vacation to remember. Uh—" He appeared about to choke to death. "The name is Al Hays. My old man and yours were pals long back."

Crazy Jack Hays must have been Al's father, an old-time partner of Luke Higgins'. He was one of the miners who had drifted elsewhere when the placer ran out. Only vaguely did Valerie remember this man. She had been seven or eight, maybe, and he had been twelve and aloof to girls when he and his father left the region. He sure had changed a lot; and, apparently, he thought that Valerie had, too, by the way he was carrying on with Betsy.

"Little Valerie," he sighed as he reminisced. "A fat little dumpling—growed into—" He couldn't think of a description suitable for a lovely like Betsy.

Valerie was real mad now.

"I never was a fat little dumpling," she snapped at him.

"You?" His neck seemed to creak as he turned his head to look at her. "Where do you fit in?"

"I'm Valerie Higgins," she told him angrily. "That girl you're hanging onto with your death grip is Betsy Biddle, Mr. Biddle's granddaughter."

Al Hays looked like a little boy whose lollypop had been taken from him. He had to struggle to pull himself together.

"Little Valerie—" he said with a sigh. He laughed nervously. "I should have known that your blue eyes wouldn't turn green and that your black hair wouldn't turn to red-gold."

"You should have, indeed!" Valerie agreed. A strange little thrill shot through her. Had he made this up on the spur of the moment—or had he remembered her all these years? Then she got down to business. "You wanted to see my pa," she said. "We have a claim away out at the end of the canyon. You can come along with me tomorrow."

Al shrugged and smashed Valerie's faint yearnings with one swift and cruel blow.

"No hurry," he said. "I've got a long vacation."

He turned back and proceeded drowning all over again in the deep green sea of Betsy's eyes.

VALERIE always spent the night with Betsy when she came to shop at the Ghost River Emporium. Betsy had a big room of her own up on the second floor. After supper, when Valerie had finished washing the dishes, she took a magazine and beat a retreat up to Betsy's room. Like

everything else about Betsy, the bedroom was loaded with frills and furbelows, yet it was not too cluttered and was rather inviting. Valerie washed up, slipped into her nightgown and robe, then stretched out on Betsy's chaise longue to read the magazine.

Usually she and Betsy would chatter awhile. But tonight Betsy was busy with Al Hays, who sat on the front porch twanging his guitar and singing cowboy songs. Valerie had to admit that Al had developed a mighty fine voice during his travels away from Haunted Canyon. She closed her eyes to listen to the melody and concentrated hard on imagining Betsy away to someplace else. Unfortunately it didn't work. It only made Valerie more angry than ever. Then she sat up and composed in her head the entry she would write in her diary when she got home the following evening.

*Guess who came back, of all people, that brat, Al Hays. A girl has to admit he turned out to be plenty handsome. But he's just as repulsive, really, as he was in the old days.*

She played with the word, "repulsive." Maybe that was a little strong. "Just as big a nuisance," might be better—but actually, he wasn't a nuisance at all. At least he wasn't bothering Valerie, hang it! Nervously she prowled around the room, finally to go back and try her magazine again. The story had no meaning for her against the background of Al's singing. Then, when there was only a long stretch of silence down there, to sit quietly reading became impossible.

Likely, Crazy Jack Hays' boy had his arm around that supple, soft waist of Betsy Biddle's. Maybe he was kissing those warm, carmine lips or whispering into Betsy's shell-like ear. Suddenly Valerie felt like screaming out the window, "You can have him—I don't want him!"

Valerie shook and shivered, then laughed aloud.

It would do nobody any good for her to start screaming. Betsy already had Al Hays hogtied. He wouldn't even look at Valerie if he could avoid it. Most likely he had already forgotten that she existed, and, Valerie swore to herself, if he never thought of her again that would be soon enough for her.

She went back to the magazine she had tried to read earlier, but the pages were only a series of blurs.

* * *

Valerie drove back up the canyon early the next morning, her ears still ringing with the happy tones of Betsy's voice as she trilled on about Al Hays. Al's old man had struck it rich in Alaska, he had told Betsy. He had sent Al to school to study mining engineering. Al had a very fine job up in Montana—but he had always wanted to see again the diggings where he had lived when he was a kid, and when a vacation turned up he came on down here. Al this, Al that, until Valerie could have choked.

Well, it was a relief to drive along behind her mules, away from it all. To Salty O'Hara, she delivered a sheaf of scented letters from lonely women. Newspapers, magazines, mail, groceries, shovels, all were left off near the mines of the men who had ordered them. For this fine service, Valerie had set fees; two-bits a week for bringing the mail; two-bits more for any small errand; and four-bits for a box of groceries. She only made about five or six bucks a week, but that was plenty of money. It kept her pa in tobacco, both of them in vittles, and sometimes there was a little left over to put away for her old age which at times did not seem to be very remote.

A girl got old mighty quick if she didn't have a proper man to love and protect her.

Dreaming, Valerie nearly rode on past Dave Anderson's place. He had not asked her to bring anything back and there was

no mail for him. Yet she hauled in the mules, anyway, to shout up to him.

"Yo-dee-oo-eee-oo!" she yodeled. The echo came back, but no Dave Anderson appeared. She yodeled again—with no better results. Worried now, afraid that something might have happened to Anderson in his mine, she tied the mules to an alder bush and climbed up through the brush to the little cabin on the steep canyon wall. His mine stope was above it, off to the left a couple of dozen yards with the tailings spread out below to show how much fruitless digging the now deceased One-eye Pete had done.

Gasping for breath after the stiff climb, Valerie stopped at the shack. The former owner, a man who liked his comforts, had piped water from a seepage higher up the canyon wall right into the kitchen. A branch ran to a tank that he had used occasionally to wash crushed rock in search of the elusive "color"—gold.

Thirsty, Valerie stepped into the cabin for a drink before climbing the rest of the way to the stope. The always running water was cool, delicious. Valerie rinsed out the glass, set it in the sink, then noticed a piece of paper on the pine table. Thinking it might explain what had happened to Dave Anderson, she picked up the paper and read it.

Dear Chuck:

Believe me, chum, I'm the luckiest man alive. My hunch was right about the Haunted Canyon mother lode. That old fool of a One-eye Pete was holding out on the rest of his pals.

These characters up here have a sort of agreement that if one hits the lode they all share in it. Pete must have never taken any quartz out. There's tons of it here all cracked up, then covered with dirt.

There's a girl comes down the canyon running errands. She's cute as a bug, Chuck. . . .

Valerie's hand trembled so violently the paper crackled like a burning fuse. A little cry escaped her lips. There was more to the letter, but she didn't read the rest. Dropping the paper on the table, she ran out of the house and kept on going at high speed until she reached the opening of the stope. There was a trickle of water along the floor of the tunnel, coolness inside, out of the sun's rays. Blood thundered in Valerie's ears. She was giddy and weak.

"Mr. Anderson—" she croaked.

She hadn't seen him standing there in the darkness only a few feet away. When he spoke, she nearly jumped out of her shoes.

"Miss Higgins—" he said. "What's the matter?"

Like a fashionable lady from the city, Valerie fainted. She passed out cold, and tumbled into the arms of the tall young miner.

AT FIRST, Valerie did not know where she was when she came back to her senses. She was on a hard bed, staring at the rough ceiling of a miner's cabin while a young man applied a cold, wet towel to her forehead. She blinked her eyes a couple of times, then looked straight at Dave Anderson. This was the first time she had ever seen him up close. She was surprised that he did not look at all like the man she had imagined him to be when she had seen him at a distance.

To begin with, he wasn't really handsome. His face was rather craggy, marked by a small scar near the nose and a larger one on his right cheek. He was older, too, than she had thought he would be—though not really old, maybe thirty-one or two. He smiled down crookedly when he saw that she was conscious again.

"You sure gave me a start," he said, "running in like that—then passing out on me. How do you feel now?"

"All right—" she said in a hardly audible voice. She didn't want to move at all for a while. Silently, Dave Anderson dipped the towel in cold water again and put it back on her forehead. It felt wonderful. And Valerie was beginning to feel fine. She couldn't remember when anybody had

taken care of her. She had always been the one to take care of the others, ever since she was six or seven and her mother, fed up on mining camps, ran away with a patent medicine drummer. "I'm okay now, Mr. Anderson," she said. "I guess I ran up that slope too fast."

She patted his hand. He turned it palm up and gripped her hand lightly. Her head spun again.

"What's the hurry?" he asked. "You couldn't have gotten the assay report yet on that ore you took down to Ghost River?"

It was more like a question than a statement.

"Of course not," she said. "Old Man Biddle will have to send your sample away. But you'll hear next week." She added, just as if she hadn't the silghtest idea how valuable his find was, "I hope the assay isn't as disappointing as most of them have been from the canyon."

"I'm not worried," he said. She studied him with new interest. He seemed like a nice guy, and hadn't he written in his letter to his friend she was cute as a bug? "You still haven't told me just what your hurry was."

"Oh!" Water from the damp towel trickled down her neck like a couple of carpenter ants on the run. She handed him the damp cloth, and sat up, shaking her head.

She felt light enough to be blown away by a zephyr. "I kind of look after folks up and down the canyon. When I yodeled and you didn't answer, I was afraid you'd been caught by a cave-in, or something."

She laughed. "I reckon I ran too fast. Well—I'd better be going."

He brought her a cup of cold water, which she drank eagerly. Then he walked down the narrow, precipitous track to the main trail up the canyon along the edge of Ghost River. He untied her mules then, and helped her up onto the buckboard seat.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The dizziness had passed from her head. She just felt a little weak and, curiously, hungry.

"You sure you'll be all right?" he asked.

"I'm fine now," she said. "Say—my father shot a fat deer a couple of weeks ago. We'll have roast venison for Sunday dinner—Yorkshire pudding, too, and all the fixings. Why don't you come on up—about noontime?"

He was suddenly suspicious.

"I don't know," he evaded. Then he added quickly, "You see—I'm sort of short on cash. I really ought to do some digging tomorrow. I've got to do as much proving up here as quick as I can."

Valerie was disappointed. The mules were in a hurry to get home and out of their harness, so she did not press her invitation. In her opinion, he had turned down the invitation for the same reason that Al Hays had been unable to see her when Betsy Biddle was around. It was fate, she reckoned.

But he *had* written that she was cute! Maybe he was just bashful. Then she remembered one small detail that she had noticed after she had gotten off the bed in his cabin. While she was unconscious, he had put away the letter he had written to his friend, Chuck. He hadn't wanted her to see it, apparently. The mules tugged at the reins.

Valerie smiled down cheerfully on Dave Anderson.

"Maybe you'll come up to dinner another Sunday," she said hopefully. Then, thinking this was as suitable a time to start being a good neighbor as any other day, she leaned down from the buckboard and kissed him full on the mouth.

The kiss left him staggered.

Valerie laughed and drove off. "Be seein' you!" she shouted back gaily over her shoulder.

He just stood in the trail staring hungrily at her until she disappeared around a bend in the road.

## CHAPTER 2 ♥ ♥ ♥

THAT night, Valerie could not sort out her emotions. She burned her father's steak and forgot to put on the coffee. Though used to her vagaries, he had never before seen her in a state like this. After he had reminded her for the second time to boil some coffee, he sat back in his chair.

"That no-account offspring of Crazy Jack Hays ain't got under your skin has he?"

"He's just as no-account as he ever was," Valerie said. "He practically boiled over when he took a sight on Betsy's hair."

"Don't know as I blame him," Luke Higgins said. "Now, if I was twenty years younger—"

"But you aren't twenty years younger," Valerie snapped at him. Her father—she was disgusted—even her father drooling over Betsy. "And don't forget it," she added.

Her father, whose wife had run out on him, and whose hopes of a bonanza had never materialized, went back to his pipe and his dreams. He could sit for hours at a time on the tiny porch fronting the two-room cabin, smoking his pipe and looking at the canyon's rim. In the last few years, after Valerie began her errand service, he had changed a little. Now he kept a cow, some chickens and a garden in a little park at the high, upper end of the canyon.

All this helped to keep them eating regularly and sometimes encouraged Valerie to think that her father might give up this endless digging for gold that was not there. But tonight the new secret that the mother lode had been found weighed heavily upon her. Anybody could have located it if his luck had been right. The mother lode didn't have to fall to One-eye Pete who never had benefited from his discovery—and certainly Dave Anderson should not have stumbled across it.

Whether to tell about the letter she read in Dave's cabin was a problem that had no ready solution for Valerie. Half a dozen times she almost mentioned it to her father, but each time she thought that it would not be fair. The people of Haunted Canyon had treated Dave Anderson like a leper. They had ignored him and made him an outsider. No wonder he felt like keeping the lode entirely to himself. Maybe, if everyone was a little kinder, he might share it.

Valerie mulled it over for a couple of days before deciding to continue on her good-neighbor policy. Relieved that her father was busy with his digging and wouldn't bother her with questions, she prepared a mighty fine dinner, packed it in a basket, and rode south to Anderson's place. She yodeled a couple of times, and Dave Anderson came out of the shack.

Climbing up the slope, Valerie thought it strange that the man was not in his mine on this working day, especially since he had said he would be too busy to come to dinner on Sunday. Well, maybe he had come down to eat his lunch or get a drink of water, or something. Not a suspicious type, Valerie reckoned that the miner must have a perfectly good reason for not digging every moment of the day, and that it was his business, not hers. She was panting after climbing the steep trail and lugging the heavy basket, yet she laughed when she reached the tiny flat space that One-eye Pete had dug from the slope for his miniature front yard.

"Here!" she gulped, setting the basket on the rickety bench. "I've been thinking about you," she added, "up here—all alone—no friends in Haunted Canyon—too busy to come to dinner on Sunday. Well—" She had to stop for breath. "I didn't have anything else to do, so I thought you might like some woman's cooking for a change. There."

She pointed to the basket. He lifted the


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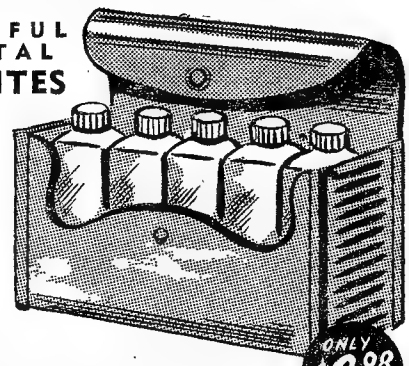

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covering napkin to look inside. Then he grinned down on her.

"Nobody ever did anything like that for me before," he said. "Gosh, miss, I don't know how to thank you."

She was still breathing rapidly, feeling shaky and strange, as if her innards were revolving like a Ferris wheel.

"Just enjoy it," she suggested. "That'll be thanks enough."

His brown eyes were boring into her, studying her body, whose curves were in no way hidden by her rough clothing, then staring concentratedly at her mouth.

"You kissed me the other day," he said.

Valerie laughed. "I just felt like it. A girl doesn't get a chance to kiss a man very often in these diggings, except people old enough to be her grandpa." She ran out of wind again. Gulping, she added, "I'll be by Monday if you want any errands run. I'll bring reports on your assay when I come back."

Moving only one step, Dave Anderson put himself between Valerie and the downslope trail. There was no way for her to escape. Though she was beginning to be a little frightened, she reckoned that if he made a pass at her it was her own fault for kissing him and then bringing him these vittles. He took her in his arms quickly, roughly. His kiss bruised her mouth and shot waves of giddiness all through her. The man's hug was like a bear's. He let go of her just as abruptly as he had grabbed her. He seemed terribly worried, while she gasped for breath and tried to keep from fainting again.

"That wasn't good, was it?" he said gloomily.

"Oh—that's all right," she forgave him.

"Maybe you'd better not come up here any more," he added. "I suppose plenty of men told you before—there's something about you that makes a man want you more than anything else in the world."

No, nobody had ever put it that way. It was Betsy Biddle who collected such sentiments—but maybe this man hadn't seen the gorgeous redhead yet.

Valerie said, "Well—thanks for the compliment."

"It wasn't a compliment," Dave Anderson said. "It's just a statement of fact. Maybe—" He stopped as if to reconsider what he was going to say. "I think I might have something good in this mine. If that assay is promising, maybe I can take time off to visit you now and then. You know—a man can't live alone forever. It didn't bother me so much until you showed up—but—"

He broke down. It sure was a crude way of proposing for some time in the future, yet it warmed up Valerie's heart.

"You can't work all the time," she said. He nodded, and she added, "Well—I'd better be going!"

He didn't block her this time, nor did he climb down the slope with her. He stood on the tiny flat space before his cabin and, when she stepped into the saddle, he waved to her. She rode home, curiously depressed. A man had practically proposed to her, a decent sort of hombre, too, it seemed—a man who had struck it rich. Valerie should have been elated—eager to tell all the world.

But she couldn't escape from the implication of the letter Dave Anderson had written to some unkown gent by the name of Chuck. Sure, that agreement between the old-timers to share the mother lode if one of them found it was only a shake-hands agreement, nothing down on paper, no way that anyone could be forced to share. But it had been standing for so long, it seemed only right that even a new man in the canyon should stick with it.

Give him time, Valerie thought.

BETSY BIDDLE and Al Hays arrived uninvited Saturday night in time for supper. Betsy was all a-twitter, dressed up in another of her revealing gowns that was

covered with a duster while she sat in the front seat of the surrey that Al tooled expertly. Betsy also wore a big hat with a veil over it that made her look very elegant, like the ladies in the magazines. Al Hays was a sure enough handsome sight, too, with a neat broadcloth suit, tattersal vest and highly polished boots. Two horses trotted along behind the surrey, one a saddle horse, the other chunky and rugged for carrying a pack. The back of the surrey was loaded with all sorts of gear.

Valerie beat a retreat when she saw who was coming, combed out her lustrous black hair, shucked her pants and shirt, and slipped into a dress she had made recently from material she had ordered from a mail order catalog. This dress was of her own design, inspired by those that Betsy had been wearing lately. Valerie had sense enough to know that she didn't have quite as much to put into a dress as Betsy had, but Valerie was sure that what she did have would assay at much more a ton than the redhead's. All she had to do, she had convinced herself, was to look like a lady, for a change, and take the chance that she would be recognized as someone more than the kid who ran errands for people and kept house for her old man.

She also stalled a little for time, though this was rather difficult in the small two-room cabin. Her father settled Betsy on the porch in the very best chair in the house. Then he brought out his jug of homemade whiskey that he kept mostly for times when his old cronies visited him. Once a year he ran off a barrel of corn liquor that he stored inside his stope until it was ready to drink. He has six barrels in there now. The likker in the jug was a good seven years old and one of the best runs Luke Higgins had ever distilled. Valerie could hear him talking.

"Yes, sir, Al—" he boasted. "Your pa always said nobody could brew likker like Luke Higgins could. He was always telling


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me I ought to quit digging and take up distilling as a business. Maybe he was right."

"Pa used to tell me that, too," Al said. "Never forgot a drop he ever drank up here, he used to say."

"To the ladies," Luke Higgins toasted. "And let me tell you, Al, the gent who gets this here Betsy gets something mighty close to the mother lode itself."

Betsy giggled.

Al said, "Right you are, sir."

Valerie gagged. She knew that her old man would moon around for days after Betsy went back to Ghost River. Waiting until the men had the second shot of whiskey before putting in her appearance. Valerie wanted to be sure that Al Hays was sufficiently warmed up before he saw her. Nervously, she gave her hair a final adjustment and shook the little cap sleeves of her daring outfit a little farther down her arms. Well—anyway—she thought, looking in the mirror, he couldn't ignore her this time. Then she walked out to the porch, swishing her skirt, making her eyes as big and round as she could, so the blue of the dress would enhance the blue of her eyes that would make any mountain lake look pallid.

The first to see her coming was Betsy, who squealed decorously.

"For goodness sake, Valerie!"

Al's head swung around; he batted his eyes a couple of times, and automatically swallowed his drink in one gulp, almost gobbling up the little glass at the same time. Valerie's pa turned, too. He became red in the face and his lips thinned.

"You take that off right away," he ordered.

Valerie had expected some such reaction from him. It was okay for Betsy to go around with bare shoulders, while she wore a far more revealing gown than Valerie's. It was a fine thing for Betsy to dress to please the men—but a crime for Valerie to do the same thing.

"If you want me to take this off right away," Valerie said directly to her father, "I will. I'll take it off right here."

Betsy squealed again. Al began to laugh. It started deep in his throat and turned into a roar. Valerie turned pink, and Luke Higgins poured himself another quick drink.

"I order you to put on something decent!" her father shouted.

Valerie's back was up. She was set to fight for her rights to be a female in this lonesome canyon country.

"This is the latest style evening dress, pa," she said, controlling her voice. "I got the pattern from *The Lady's Friend* magazine. Betsy will back me up, won't you?"

"I sure will," Betsy said. "Gosh, you look grand in it!"

Valerie smiled her thanks. "And I intend to keep on looking grand in it," she said. Turning to her father, she added, "I've always done everything you wanted me to do. I'm not a baby any more. From now on I'm going to live my own life in my own way. If you want to toss orders at somebody, you can go out and look for somebody else to throw them at."

It was a bitter pill for her father to take. Valerie thought for a moment that he was going to fight. But he gave in abruptly.

"I guess you're old enough to know what you want," he said, "and if you insist on going around half naked and catching pneumonia, I guess there's nothing I can do about it."

Valerie guessed the same too, but didn't say so. She just pitched her most devastating glance at Al Hays and was pleased to see that it definitely shook him.

YET is seemed to Valerie that everything went from bad to worse. Her father insisted on sitting up that night to the bitter end. So did Betsy Biddle. Luke Higgins and Al Hays talked mining while the girls tried to catch up on the very slim amount of gossip that floated up and down

the canyon. Al said he was thinking of doing a little prospecting while on his vacation. He wanted to go right up to the end of the canyon and work down, he told Luke Higgins. Luke told him it was a waste of time because there was nothing up there.

Valerie wanted to discuss the letter she had read in Dave Anderson's cabin but decided to wait until she found out what the assay would prove, though it certainly seemed that it would turn out to be fabulous. Luke and Al talked more mining, so finally Betsy and Valerie went to bed in the back room. Luke would sleep in the loft as usual, and Al could have the porch or main room floor for his bed.

"Isn't he thrilling?" Betsy bubbled to Valerie. "I mean—Al Hays!"

Valerie shrugged it off. "I'd go along with you if you meant Dave Anderson."

"Oh, him!" Betsy said. "Do you think that gold he's found is really worth much? I guess I shouldn't have done it, but I just had to tell Al about it. Al shrugged it off."

Valerie shrugged, too, and thought with a curious secret feeling what a big surprise everybody was going to have when One-eye Pete's hoard came to view, since, even if she did keep quiet about Dave Anderson's letter, the news was sure to leak out anyway. It seemed hours before Valerie fell into a troubled sleep. Visions of Al Hays digging up tremendous quantities of gold, chased through her dreams. Visions of Al Hays holding her close, kissing her as Dave had done, crept up on her and woke her. The heck with him, she thought, and lay down again to try to sleep.

She woke to Sunday morning nervous as a jay bird, wishing that Al and Betsy would go away. But they stuck close together. Al would open and close doors whenever Betsy went into or out of the house. He also held the chair for her when she sat down at the table. Al, who had been a rough diamond in his youth, had sure enough turned into a gentleman—at least

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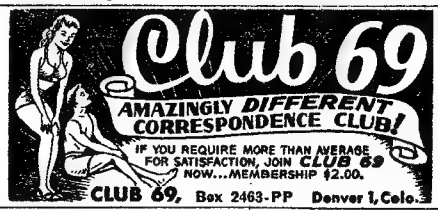
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as far as Betsy was concerned. He even took her for a Sunday evening stroll—up to the lookout on the canyon rim. They didn't ask Valerie to come along, and they didn't come back until after the moon came up.

When Monday morning arrived, Valerie was so annoyed she hitched up her mules an hour earlier than usual. Her father and Al Hays had finished their plans to go on up the canyon for a couple of days. Betsy reckoned she had better go back to Ghost River, since she would be too lonesome sitting around the house alone. So Valerie took her aboard and drove her team down the trail at a smart clip.

There was a letter waiting under the white rock below the mine that Dave Anderson was working. It was addressed to Chuck Moulton in Denver. Since Valerie had read it when she first saw it on the Anderson table, she knew all about it. But Betsy Biddle was curious, especially because Dave had apparently forgotten to seal the envelope. Before Betsy could read it, Valerie slipped it into the mail bag.

For once, old Salty O'Hara did not have a letter to some hopeful widow. He was down at the trail waiting for Valerie when she drove up. He was as excited as a Mexican jumping bean.

"Say—Valerie—" he stuttered. "What's this I hear about that Anderson hombre striking it rich in Pete's old mine?"

"He sent out some samples last week," Valerie said. "But I haven't heard about the assay."

"Why—one chunk—this is what Charlie Ingalls passed up to me—" Salty O'Hara's words tumbled over each other. "Said it run over two hundred dollars to the ton—said another was over three hundred."

Betsy squealed.

Valerie said, "Gee! Is that a fact?" Anderson's letter seemed to be burning a hole in the mail pouch.

"You'd think One-eye Pete might of found it," Salty said sadly.

"You sure would," Valerie agreed.

She clucked to the horses, and around the next bend Charlie Ingalls was waiting for her, bursting with the same information. It began to look like a holiday had been declared, by the number of old-timers who had come down from their claims, all as excited as little kids at a birthday party. By the time Valerie got to the store, she was steamed up, too, but she had definitely made up her mind not to mention Dave Anderson's letter.

It would cause too big a ruckus if these old-timers learned that Dave had no intention of sticking to the agreement and sharing his find with them. She figured she would rather talk to Dave about it before letting out the sorry news. If the find was fabulous as it appeared to be, surely the newcomer to the canyon would share part of it with the old boys who had been hunting so long for it.

Old Man Biddle was excited as the rest.

"You hear the results of those assays?" he cried.

"Sure!" Valerie said. "I guess everybody in the canyon but the fellow the assay was made for, knows the results. But why get worked up? Maybe he only struck a pocket. If there was a lot of gold up there, One-eye Pete would have found some—anyway."

"I dunno!" Old Man Biddle didn't give in easily.

Valerie threw the mail bag on the counter, then took out the list of things to be delivered. She hadn't noticed that Betsy had disappeared until the redhead suddenly screamed from behind a stack of overalls. She screamed half a dozen times in quick succession.

She had fished Dave Anderson's letter from the mail pouch, and had read it. Trembling, she handed the paper to her grandfather. Adjusting his glasses, he read it, too. He turned white, then red, and slammed the letter down on the counter.

"Good grief!" he shouted. "I knew One-

eye Pete was up to something snide. I knew it." Then he became canny. "That was Pete's gold. Pete was in on this agreement. This young feller can't take Pete's gold and keep it." He nodded. "Yessir—that's ours."

"But suppose he won't give it up?" Valerie asked.

The old man's glance moved to a rack of shotguns and rifles—then back to her.

"There's ways to convince him," he said hoarsely. "Remember that feller we hanged for stealing a shipment of dust? Well—there's plenty of boys around here who were on that posse."

Valerie was becoming frantic. Thinking of all the old-timers up the canyon—of their ageless dream. Yes, they'd kill Dave Anderson for his mine—and later on they'd all regret it.

"Reckon I'll take a little walk," she said. "This kind of has me all wound up."

Outside, she waited only a moment before climbing into the buckboard, turning the mules up-canyon and applying the whip. She reckoned she had to make Anderson see light before something terrible happened.

## CHAPTER 3 ♥ ♥ ♥

IT IS doubtful if any vehicle had ever gone up the trail with a speed approaching that of the mule-drawn buckboard. Valerie rocketed along through the late part of a hot afternoon much to the astonishment of the old-timers who had gathered in groups of two or three to discuss the phenomenal find in Pete's old mine.

Dusk came on, and it was nearly dark when she hauled in the team and dropped to the trail below Dave Anderson's place. Excitedly she clambered up to his cabin, but he was not there. Though another half-


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written letter lay on his table, she did not stop to read it. In his tiny yard she tried to shout, but found that her voice was only a squeak. Maybe he was working far back in the mine.

At the opening of the stope, Valerie could not see any light. Breathing deeply, she managed to get up a fair-sized shout. The sound echoed hollowly up and down the mine. She didn't have nerve enough to go into that dark place, and obviously Dave Anderson wasn't there, or he would have answered her.

It was a relief to get back out in the semi-dusk of the coming night. As she stood looking down on the trail, her mules suddenly took off for home. She shouted wildly at them, but they kept on going. Then they broke into a fast run and, after a while, there was nothing but silence.

Valerie went back to the cabin and lighted a lamp.

Having read one of Dave Anderson's letter, she had no compunctions about another. This was to the president of a Denver bank and, surprisingly, saluted him as "Dear Ed." Then it went on:

> I think I've found a bonanza in this One-eye Pete mine you helped stake me to. I won't need much to develop it, since this crazy Pete hombre has already dug a lot of ore and hid it under the mine floor. But we ought to have about ten thousand to get things moving here. Also, I need a lawyer. These local characters think they own a share in the mine. I want this cleared up before we go any further. Could you send up someone good to take care of this?
>
> Your old pal,
> Dave.

Valerie didn't know what to do. It didn't make sense that Dave Anderson would go off somewhere leaving a fortune behind. But he obviously wasn't around. She reckoned she would leave him a note and start the hike home to take care of the mules. With a blunt pencil she scrawled:

> You'll need more than a lawyer, Dave. The old boys are getting up a posse. They figure to split on this deal, or else. Betsy Biddle read your letter to the fellow in Denver and the whole canyon is boiling over.

She guessed that would do. Weighting the note down with a chunk of rock, she blew out the lamp and stepped through the door. From upslope a cold voice challenged her.

"I got a rifle," Dave Anderson said. "Come on up here so I can see who you are, or I'll shoot."

Valerie's knees banged together, and her heart went on a merry-go-round, but she managed to gasp out, "It's me, Dave—Valerie Higgins."

"Just climb up here and let me look at you!" His voice sounded unfriendly.

Valerie started up the steep canyonside.

* * *

He had forted himself up behind a couple of big boulders where he could watch the trail down canyon, the mine entrance and his little shack. He had food and water, plus a coupe of rifles, a shotgun, a case of ammunition and a box of dynamite. Dave Anderson was ready for a siege. He was still wary when Valerie climbed over his barricade.

"You coming on your own?" he asked, "or did somebody send you?"

She was as afraid of him now as she had been a moment ago when he challenged her from the night.

"I'm trying to keep you from hurting a lot of nice guys and from being hurt yourself," she said. "Gold isn't worth all that."

"What do they want?" he asked. "They've been riding by here all day—looking at me with field glasses. Someone took a pot shot at me."

"If you want to know, they've discovered what you found up here," Valerie told him. "Old Man Biddle was curious from the first when he saw those samples you sent out to be assayed. Everybody knew about them. Then Betsy read that letter you wrote to your friend in Denver. Maybe she wouldn't have if you hadn't carelessly forgotten to seal it."

He was silent for a moment. In the can-

yon below them there was a movement of men and animals, furtive, cautious and careful. A mule brayed raucously up-canyon from the place, a mule that Valerie recognized as Ike, which apparently had decided to come back after all. There was a feeling of being pushed around and crowded, even up here in the free air of the canyon's side. Then Dave Anderson set his jaw.

"It's mine!" he said. "I own the claim. I bought it. I figured out from a number of things that One-eye Pete was holding out on his friends. If they hadn't brains enough to figure it out, they haven't any right to what he found here."

THE TROUBLE was, Valerie thought, that everybody was more or less right in this argument—everybody, that is, but One-eye Pete. She wished he hadn't kicked the bucket while hiding this bonanza, and that her pa and Al Hays were here. She didn't have enough arguments to convince Dave Anderson.

"It may be yours," she said slowly. "That is, it may be yours legally. But you're not going to enjoy it when you're farther underground than your ore—are you?"

"I found it," he insisted. "I'm not going to let them steal it from me."

Valerie guessed arguing was useless. Then she remembered a phrase in the last letter of his which she had read.

"You're going to need money to develop the mine," she said. "Maybe the boys would be willing to pay a little—or work for shares—or something. Maybe you could save everybody a little trouble by making them an offer."

"The hell with it!" He was bitter.

The canyon below had filled with angry men. Without a leader, they had not gotten up the nerve to attack Dave Anderson, but sooner or later they would charge. Valerie was desperate.

"You can't just sit here and shoot it out!"

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"Sure I can!" he told her. "Who's afraid of those old men?"

"I am!" she said, and suddenly she realized that she was afraid of Anderson, too. "You'd let them attack while I'm here, too?"

He held her away with another of his long silences. Then he cleared his throat loudly.

"What do you hombres want?" he shouted. "I got me a woman up here. We don't want to be bothered."

Valerie was shocked. Old Man Biddle was only angry.

"We know what else you got up there, mister, and we got a claim to our share in it," he called up the slope. "We want to be sure we get it, too. And the hell with a girl who'll inform on her friends."

That numbed Valerie.

Salty O'Hara's voice rasped out, "Now you're being kind of rough on Valerie, Biddle, is my opinion. Let's just parley with this hombre a bit."

They were grouped below. A man with a strong arm could blast them to bits with a few sticks of dynamite. They were too pigheaded to give up. Then Dave Anderson turned the tables. He stood up behind his barricade.

"This little girl has your interests at heart, gentlemen," he told the old-timers of Haunted Canyon. "A man with a mine needs a little cash to help develop it. She's trying to argue me into letting you boys put it up. But I won't take it."

Old Man Biddle swore.

Salty O'Hara muttered, "Now—just tell us why, mister."

"Because the mine ain't worth nothing," Dave Anderson said.

Valerie gasped. "But it is," she wanted to cry out. Here was what they had all been hunting for.

"Now, just go away and leave us alone," Anderson added.

Down below, the argument grew hot, and Dave Anderson began to laugh.

"That's a dirty, low trick," Valerie said to him. "I read all those letters you wrote—the one to the banker, too." And she had seen the sample ore.

"Oh?" he said. Then he shouted down below, "If you boys want to buy half rights in a worthless mine for ten thousand bucks, it's yours—because this little lady persuaded me to share it with you."

"Okay," Old Man Biddle finally said after another conference. "But we want a look at it first."

"Oh, no!" Dave answered. "If you looked at it, you wouldn't give me the ten thousand. You pay up without looking, and we'll form a company. But if you don't pay up, I want to be left alone to develop it."

There was an ominous silence below, a spate of talk, and silence again. Dave Anderson turned to Valerie with a chuckle and said in a whisper that only she could hear, "They'll turn it down. It'll clear me of any obligation to that old agreement. I can do what I want with the loot, and we'll be rich."

"We?"

"Of course," he said. "You brought me this luck. You know I've wanted you ever since the first time I saw you. Now come on over here and give me a hug while those old fogies argue themselves out of a fortune."

VALERIE stood up, but she did not go to Dave Anderson immediately. A number of things clicked in her mind. First, the samples of gold that assayed so high—then the letter telling of One-eye Pete's hoard. Finally, the letter to the "banker." This hombre had been mighty careless for a man who wanted to keep a secret, or he had deliberately peddled a phoney set of evidence to get a good price on a phoney mine. She knew—and Dave knew, too—that the old-timers would pay his price. They had faith in their own worthless mines for so long, they would surely think that finally they had hit pay dirt.

She reddened with embarrassment at having been sucked into his scheme. Then she became violently angry. She jumped to her feet and cussed him out.

"You dog—" she said. "You dirty dog! You planted those letters and the gold samples. I'm going—"

"Shut up!" he snapped at her.

Viciously, he slapped her, backhanded, across the mouth. It knocked her flat, stunning her. He moved fast. He gagged her with a piece of shirt before she could put up any sort of battle. While a heated conference went on below, he carried her down to the mine shaft, took her inside and bound her to a support timber. Then he scrambled back to his little fort, higher up the slope, where he would be in a good position to accept any offer made and still retreat over the canyon's rim before he was found out.

In the mine, Valerie fought agonizingly with ropes until she knew it was no use. She struggled to free herself of the gag, but could not budge it. Finally she gave up, not so sorry for herself as she was for her old friends whom she had helped sucker into a fraud. They could raise the money, and probably would. Then Old Man Biddle's voice rose up from the trail again.

"Okay, stranger, we take you up." After all, he had seen the letter to the man in Denver and he had seen the assay on the samples of gold. "Ten thousand for half rights. But it'll take us a little while to gather it."

"Take your time," Dave shouted back. "But don't be too disappointed if you never get that ten thousand back out of the mine."

Clever, he was, talking down the mine so they would not suspect that he was selling them a swindle. Valerie fought again with the bonds, but still could not budge them. She tried to concentrate very hard in a sort of telepathic communication with Old Man Biddle. Time passed, and it seemed forever to Valerie, in the mine shaft, while horses trotted up and down the canyon and


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her Ike mule brayed again. As if the mule's bray were the signal, the storekeeper shouted again up-slope.

"We got that ten thousand—some money—some dust. You want to come down and get it?"

"Send it up!" Dave's voice was edgy.

Valerie shuddered. She twisted her head back against the rough post, in a mad effort to shake the gag loose. It seemed to her that it gave a little. Frantically, she tried again, but had to quit once more when breathing became almost impossible. Now she could hear someone slowly climbing up the slope. Reaching the cabin, he stopped.

"Where are you?" he asked.

"Up here!" This cool character, Dave Anderson, was getting excited.

The messenger from the old-timers climbed some more. Tensely, Valerie listened.

"You Mr. Anderson?" he asked. "Owner of One-eye Pete's mine?"

"That's me. Just hand over the dough, and I guess we can go down and fill out the papers."

"Okay, Mr. Anderson."

Through her agony, Valerie recognized the voice as being Al Hays'.

"You're a skunk, Mr. Anderson," Al went on. "You're a louse and a liar. And if you've hurt Valerie, I'll kill you."

With one last effort, Valerie freed herself of the gag.

"Al—Al—" she gasped.

Valerie heard a fist splat against a jaw. A gun blasted.

Anderson swore bitterly, then grunted as Al kicked him in the belly. There was a lot of scrambling around among the rocks. A rifle slid down the slope, blasting again. Tied to a post in the mine, Valerie thought that she would go crazy with the suspense. She could hear the men slugging it out again—then a great tumbling sound as something rolled down the canyon walls. A man up in the little fort stood breathing heavily.

"Catch him, boys, and hold him for me." It was Al. "I got a date with a girl in a mine."

GENTLY, Al unbound her. When she nearly fainted from the tension and from having been tied so long, he picked her up, carried her outside.

"I'm all right now," she gasped. "I guess I'm a fool. You can leave me be and go back to Betsy."

"We're all fools sometimes," he said slowly, "and I'd be a fool to go back to Betsy, as you call it." He stopped again. "I was just having a little joke with you at first. I figured on following you right out to the ranch. But I saw that gold—and Betsy said you were mad over Anderson. I had to find out."

"Oh, Al!" she cried, flinging her arms around his neck.

"It was the gold samples that gave him away," Al said. "I've studied mining and worked at it in new ways, and I know there isn't anything like that around here. So I hung around to see what he was up to. But there's other stuff just as valuable as gold—ore the old-timers never heard of, such as vanadium, tungsten, uranium—and we'll all go out to find it."

Valerie hung onto his neck. She didn't care about those strangely named metals. She just wished he'd do something more than just hold her in his arms like a baby. But even only that was mighty pleasant.

"I came back, Valerie," he said, "and I reckon I've already found my own bonanza."

"Then maybe you better start proving up your claim," she said, closing her eyes.

His lips were very gentle on hers, and his arms snug. Then something strange happened inside her, something she had never suspected could happen. Her heart began to beat like crazy, and she knew that this was her man forever and that the vein of ore he had found would never give out. ♥ ♥ ♥

# TRAILSIDE COOK BOOK

## By Myrtle Juliette Corey

### SPAGHETTI WITH MEAT SAUCE

Make the sauce the previous day. In a large kettle put 1 cup salad or cooking oil. Add 1 cup minced onion and simmer for 5 minutes. Then add 4 pounds of ground chuck beef and 8 minced and peeled garlic cloves. Then cook, stirring until the meat is slightly browned. Add 6 three-ounce cans sliced mushrooms with their liquid, 1 cup minced parsley, 2 cups sliced, stuffed olives, 4 eight-ounce cans of tomatoes. First force the tomatoes through a sieve. Lastly add 2 level tablespoons salt, 2 teaspoons pepper and 2 teaspoons sugar. Cover and simmer one hour. Uncover, cook two hours very slowly, stirring occasionally. Cool and chill. About two hours before serving, cook 6 pounds of spaghetti in 4 gallons of boiling water to which 3 level tablespoons salt have been added. When tender (twenty to twenty-five minutes) drain in colander. Meanwhile heat sauce, adding 1 pound sharp American cheese diced. Stir occasionally until cheese has melted and sauce is hot. Serve over the spaghetti with grated Parmesian cheese. *Twenty-five servings.*

In planning for party feeds it's well to remember that women are pleased with unusual dishes or odd methods of serving them.

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## BROILED FISH STEAKS WITH SAUCE

Combine ½ cup mayonnaise or salad dressing with ¼ cup finely chopped parsley, 3 tablespoons pickle relish, 1 teaspoon lemon juice, 1½ teaspoons Worcestershire sauce, 1 teaspoon minced onion and ¼ teaspoon salt. Fold in the stiffly beaten whites of 2 eggs. Grease the broiler pan. Heat. Wipe fish with damp, clean cloth. Sprinkle lightly with salt and pepper. Place on preheated broiler pan. With fish two inches from tip of the flame, broil five or ten minutes, turning once. Fish should flake easily with fork tine. Spread the top of the steaks with the sauce. Broil two or three minutes longer, or until the sauce is puffed and lightly browned. Place on heated platter and serve with mashed potatoes.

## LOBSTER WITH CAULIFLOWER

Wash and trim the head of a cauliflower. Leave whole and stand in cold water to which has been added the juice of 1 lemon. Put 1 pint of water in saucepan and add ½ teaspoon salt. Stand cauliflower with flower side up in saucepan and steam cook for thirty minutes. Remove to plate and surround with lobster sauce made as follows:

Heat 3 tablespoons of butter in pan. Stir in 1 cup of lobster meat broken into bits. When hot, stir in 3 tablespoons of flour. When well blended, add 2 cups of milk, salt and pepper to taste.

If you are going on a camping trip and like some fare that isn't strictly plain, take a few cans of the foods that may be made into dishes like the foregoing. After a few days of simple meals it's a tempting contrast to spring a dish that usually appears only at town meals.

## ZIG-ZAG CAKE

is not slimming, but it's too good not to try. Nice for one of those special occasion meals. For this, use two nine-inch cake pans that are an inch and a half deep. Have them ready, lined on the bottom with paper, then greased. Sift together 2½ cups of presifted flour, 1½ teaspoons baking powder, 1 teaspoon salt, ½ teaspoon of soda and 1⅔ cups sugar.

Measure into the mixing bowl ¾ of a cup of shortening. If you are using butter, margarine or lard, have ready ¾ cup of sour milk. With vegetable shortening you'll need 1 cup milk.

Mix in a small bowl and let stand while mixing the cake: 1 square of unsweetened melted chocolate, 2 tablespoons hot water, ¼ teaspoon soda and 1 tablespoon of sugar.

Stir the shortening in bowl until it is soft. Sift in dry ingredients. Add milk and mix until the flour is all dampened. Beat thoroughly. Add 1 teaspoon vanilla and 3 unbeaten eggs, and beat one hundred and fifty strokes by hand. Add the chocolate mixture to ¼ of the cake batter. Put into the baking pans large spoonfuls of the mixtures, alternating chocolate and plain. Then take a knife and cut through the batter in a zig-zag manner. Bake in moderate oven thirty to thirty-five minutes. Cool for five minutes. Loosen cakes from side of pans with spatula and turn upside down to finish cooling. Put layers together with any chocolate frosting you favor. A half cup of chopped maraschino cherries, drained and added to part of the frosting, makes an extra nice filling.

### QUICK CLAM CHOWDER

Fry ½ cup diced salt pork. Remove the scraps. Add one thinly sliced onion. Fry till light brown. Add 1 tablespoon flour. Put in layers of potatoes and clams—1 quart sliced, raw potatoes, 1 pint clams. Cover with boiling water and cook until potatoes are soft, about fifteen minutes. Add 1 pint hot milk, 1 teaspoon salt and ½ teaspoon pepper. Lastly add 4 crackers broken into bits. Oyster chowder may be made in the same manner.

### BAKED SHRIMPS

Wash and drain 1 pint of shrimps. Melt 2 tablespoons of butter in saucepan and heat shrimps in this. Stir in 2 tablespoons of flour. Add 1½ cups milk. Stir well and cook until mixture bubbles. Add ½ cup of cooking wine or orange juice, a bit of lemon peel, ½ teaspoon salt, a little pepper and a sprinkling of mace. Stir in 2 well beaten eggs. Place in an open baking dish or casserole, cover with buttered utes in a moderate oven.

### SHRIMP CHOWDER

Fry two tablespoons of minced pork fat, or melt the same amount of butter and cook in it 1 tablespoon of chopped onion until tender but not browned. Add 1 tablespoon flour and 1½ cups milk. Stir in slowly until smooth. Add 1 cup diced, cold boiled potatoes, ½ cup canned shrimp, and salt and pepper to taste. Simmer for five or six minutes. Serve with crisp crackers.


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*Through bright moonbeams.*

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*Of whippoorwills;*
*So soft the breeze*
*From sage-grown hills.*

*So filled with bliss*
*Each tender word—*
*How shocking if*
*The cynics heard.*

*But cynics shun*
*Where moonsilver drips;*
*So hurry, dear,*
*And kiss my lips!*

***—Pauline Booker***

## *CARRYIN' THE MAIL*

*(Continued from page 9)*

**From the Hills of Alabama**

Dear Editor:

How about letting a lonesome gal from the Hills of Alabama get into the crowd around the mailbag? Am 21 years old, have brown hair, blue eyes, am 5 feet 11 inches tall, and am a divorcee. I live with my parents, so how about writing?

ELIZABETH NESBITT
Rt. 1, Box 364-B
Empire, Ala.

**Yipp--ee, Fourteen-Year-Olds!**

Dear Editor:

Say! How about printing two Illinois girls' pleas for pals? We like mail too, you know. I am 5 ft. tall, light reddish blond hair. Green eyes. 14 years old. Likes horses and dogs, also sports. Delories is 14 also. She has brown hair, brown eyes, 5 ft. tall, likes cats and horses and all sports.

We are wanting our boxes filled.

DELORIES TYNER
JUNE AKINS
Cambria, Ill.

**From Florida Air Force**

Dear Editor:

I would appreciate it very much if you could squeeze me in some place on the Carryin' The Mail department. Regardless of how much I write, I receive very little and sometimes no mail at all. I promise to answer all mail that comes my way. I am also very anxious to have many pen pals. I am 22 years old, weigh 150 pounds, have brown hair and eyes, dark complexion when suntanned, and am 5 feet 6½ inches tall. I am also in the Air Force and have two more years to serve unless I change my mind. I like Western and hillbilly music, all sports, and am extremely lonely. I would like to hear from girls and boys around my own age (18-25).

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### Horoscope Fan

Dear Editor:

I have been reading *15 Range Romances* for quite a while now. I am 32 years old, have been in the service 12 years, 10 months of which I spent in Korea. I am single and have a hobby that some people think is strange. It's guessing other people's birth months. So to keep me from guessing you give me your birth month. I just want to prove that belief in the stars and in the horoscope isn't foolish.

I would like to hear from young ladies in the ages from 23 to 27, that are single. Don't forget, now, to mention your birth month.

WILLIAM L. ARVIN
1018 N. Mill St.
Fairmont, Ind.

### Can He Join?

Dear Editor:

How about a serviceman joining the Carryin' The Mail gang? I am a regular reader of *15 Range Romances,* and would like very much to receive mail from some of you girls out there.

I am 22 years old, 5 feet 11 inches tall, weigh 160 pounds. I have black hair, blue eyes, and dark complexion. I like all kinds of sports, especially basketball, and baseball. My native state is Florida.

I will answer all letters and will be glad to exchange snapshots with anyone interested, so come on, how about filling up my mail box the next time the postman comes around, especially you girls from 17 to 25?

A/2C CHARLES L. CAMPBELL
14271183
804th Food Service Squadron
Hunter Air Force Base
Savannah, Ga.

### No Age Limits

Dear Editor:

How's about letting a gal from Michigan in with your wonderful gang of Carryin' The Mail department? I would like pen pals from anywhere, near or far. Will answer all. No limit on the age. I am sixteen, 5 feet tall, have brown hair, hazel eyes, weigh about 110 pounds, and am a sophomore in high school. I like most all sports, music, movies, animals, and people. My hobby is photography. I would be glad to exchange snapshots.

So won't someone please answer? Will be looking for you, boys and gals.

GLADYS FINEHOUT
942 Ramona
Benton Harbor, Mich.

### Servicemen First

Dear Editor:

This is my first try at Carryin' The Mail, and I hope it won't be in vain. I am seventeen, have black hair, gray eyes, and am 5 feet 4½ inches tall. I like all kinds of sports, especially horseback riding, skating, and writing letters. I would like mostly to hear from servicemen and I would like to help cheer them up and do my part. May I hear from all? I will answer all letters and will be glad to exchange snapshots.

MARY JO DAUGHERTY
Route 1, Box 7
Princeton, West Va.

### Great Reading Enjoyment

Dear Editor:

I'm a fellow just out of Service since September, and I would like very much to get better acquainted with all of your readers. *15 Range Romances* offers me great enjoyment in reading. I am 25 years young, have black hair, brown eyes and weigh 190 pounds. My hobbies are fishing, reading and any outdoor sport. I work in a rug factory, and I can tell a few interesting points on that, besides my interesting travels while I was in the Service.

BOB LUKE
1625 Candlewood Dr.
Salem, Ore.

### Interested in Am. Indians

Dear Editor:

I am interested in writing to Indians. I like all Indians and wish them to write to me. I am also interested in all Service men and women. I am 15, have brown wavy hair and hazel eyes. I am 5 feet tall and wengh 120 pounds. Any other person who wishes to write to me will receive letters back as soon as I get them. I will be glad to exchange snapshots with anyone who wants to.

CHRISTINE LEWIS
Thurmont, Md.

### Paging Pals

Dear Editor:

I'm a lonely Colorado girl here in California. I am 5 feet 3, weigh 120. I have dark auburn hair and dark brown eyes. I'm 23 years old. I like dancing and hillbilly music best. Would exchange pictures and letters with some nice men ages 23 to 28. Be waiting!

TERRI DORNEKAMP
1610 East Main St.
Stockton, Calif.

### Collects Western Romance Mags

Dear Editor:

Here's hoping you will publish my plea. I'm a girl, 5 feet 8 inches tall, weigh 130 pounds, brown hair and eyes. I will be a sophomore next fall. Play the piano and enjoy Western and hillbilly music very much. I collect Western love story magazines. I also draw and paint.

JOSIE BELLE WOOD
Route 1
Oklawaha, Fla.

### Wants Real True Buddy

Dear Editor:

I am 24 years old, 6 feet tall, weigh 185 pounds. I live at home with my parents. I love music, writing letters and taking long walks in the country. I am single and a vet. I will answer all letters and exchange photos.

MERLE NEWVILLE
625 Spruce St.
Madison, Wis.

## *A KISS FOR KATIE*

*(Continued from page 47)*

ting on blue jeans every morning. She fed the animals, fixed fences, and poisoned army worms until dark.

She ached constantly. Rough calluses appeared on her soft hands, and there were dark smudges under her eyes. She lost weight because she didn't eat much, but she kept working. Clay had said she could save the ranch, and even if he hadn't meant it, she was determined to do it.

Gerald Helvis drove out often. Katie didn't discourage him but she scarcely noticed him, except to listen for any hint that might tell her that he was responsible for the worms on her land. He often urged her to marry him. Hawking the soft life she would live as his wife in the same way a feed salesman would barter a sack of oats.

When the third week passed, she knew she was losing the fight. The poison worked on the worms, but new sieges

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cropped up faster than she could kill them. The poison she sprayed on the grass made it dangerous for the cows to eat and the constant shifting from pasture to pasture made them lean and stringy. The water supply was low in the south pasture, and Katie didn't know how to ration it.

It was late afternoon. She sat down wearily in the kitchen, rubbing her temples. Her eyes caught the mirror over the water bucket and she gasped. Her cheekbones stood out, her eyes above them were slanted and wary like a cat's. The plaid shirt and blue jeans were torn and dusty. At least the hair was the same. It was all that seemed to be left of the old happy Katie.

She sat up suddenly, hearing voices outside.

Two men were dismounting from horses. She recognized Gerald Helvis, looking angry and flustered, as he dismounted carefully and preceded the other man to the porch. The other, a dark moustached Spaniard, wearing a black jacket and tall sombrero, stayed close behind, holding something to Helvis' back.

Katie backed away. Two cowboys came up from the barn, hesitated, then stood watching. The dark man prodded Helvis up the steps.

The cowboys nudged one another and hurried up to see better.

"Your wealthy friend," a familiar voice said, "has something interesting to show you."

Katie caught her breath. The voice was Clay's, but the swarthy complexion and Spanish clothes couldn't be.

"Clay!" she exclaimed.

"Right. A little stained and dyed, but Clay, the same as ever," he said softly. "I couldn't catch Helvis planting the worms by staying here, so I pretended to desert and got myself a job as one of his hirelings."

She nodded toward Helvis. "But how can you prove—"

Clay pulled a leather pouch from his studded belt. Katie, leaning close, could see tufts of grass inside. She pulled several out, then crumpled them in her fist. "Full of army worms," she told him bitterly.

"He sodded them in your land at night. I finally got a chance to go along on a trip. That was all the proof I needed."

"Then you succeeded where I couldn't," she said, and she turned to move back inside.

Clay touched her shoulder gently. "The boys are taking Helvis back into town now. He won't bother your land any more, Katie."

She closed her eyes wearily. She was tired. She was almost too tired to talk to Clay.

"I was wrong about you, Katie. A beautiful woman who knows the finer things is wonderful, and a whip-strong little wildcat makes a mighty good helpmate in times of trouble. You're both."

Smiling, she turned to him, some of the tiredness leaving her. "But I'm a flirt, and my lips are too full and curvy to be quite decent—" She cocked an eyebrow almost gaily.

Clay surrendered with upraised hands. "I had that coming." And then he pulled her close again. "I knew, when I saw you in Helvis' arms, that I had to have you for myself. It took awhile for me to realize why you were there, but when I did, I knew you loved Clearview the way Dan had. We aren't in two different classes, Katie. We're just two people in love, ready to fight for the happiness which is our right here."

Katie sighed softly. She felt completely safe and contented. A soft breeze fluttered her curls as Clay kissed her, and somewhere in the yard a stallion nickered jealously for his master, but Clay and Katie didn't hear.

"Your lips look just right," he said finally, "after they've been kissed." ♥ ♥ ♥

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